This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

600073102J

MILLICENT'S CHILDREN.

A Novel.

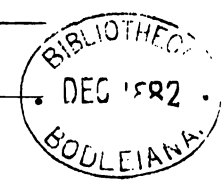
IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. BASELEY,

Author of "Lady Moreton's Governess," "Winnie's Sister," &c.

VOL. II.



London:
REMINGTON AND CO.,
New Bond Street, W.

1883.

[*All Rights Reserved.*]

251. k. 188.

MILLICENT'S CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

Mr. Duerdon did keep his word of having a private chat with Muriel. He spoke to her in all gentleness, yet with a firmness that could hardly have been expected from him. He told her that all respect and obedience was due from her to his wife, no matter how difficult to perform. He said above and beyond all this how much happier the house would be if she would try and cultivate a little affection for Mrs. Duerdon. A little was all he asked.

Muriel felt strangely comforted after his visit. She owned to herself that she never could fail in respect to him, and she felt as if the remembrance of that talk would enable her to preserve silence in Mrs. Duerdon's presence for the future, no matter how much provoked. But as for learning to like Mrs. Duerdon, she shook her head. It was a little more than she could do. Mr. Duerdon had hinted that Muriel could obtain forgiveness and her liberty again by appealing to Mrs. Duerdon,

but this the young girl would not do. It was not that she was too obstinate or too sulky, but she doubted the result of the concession. She would rather keep out of the way and be forgotten. Norman spent the greater part of every day with his sister. He would never have left her unless for meals until bedtime, but this Muriel would not hear of; she coaxed him to go for many a canter on Sultan, for many a walk to get her wild roses and honeysuckle. She knew how beneficial the fresh air was to him. Muriel got paler and paler; she was somewhat of a gipsy in her nature, and needed freedom and air, but she never complained. She missed her piano and the practises which she loved, but she had still her voice, no one could deprive her of that, and in the large rooms upstairs she warbled away liked a caged bird, unheard but by several of the servants, and of course her brother.

Owen was not allowed to go near her; this was part of her punishment. By a singular fate, just at the present time Signor Tolli was away. His visits would have been a break in the dreary life. Muriel never allowed herself to murmur; she felt that Norman's love was enough to fill any gap. As long as he was with her she had everything, but when he was gone—ah, when—but she must not think of that time; sufficient for her was the present.

Norman observed the same rule; as if he alto-

gether forgot the impending separation, he never alluded to it. It had to be, but there was no need to make bad worse by gloomy anticipation, and like Muriel, if he wearied of the present monotony, he never by even so much as one word owned to the feeling.

The day, the long-dreaded day of departure, arrived at last. It was rather wonderful it had taken so long in coming, considering that time was quite at the Duerdons' command. There was nothing to occasion delay; yet they waited ten days after Muriel's banishment before they started. Norman was very restless as the time drew near; he was dressed and waiting for the carriage, but not even yet did he wish his feelings to betray him. If he could only smile and laugh Muriel would really think he was happy, and that would be a cheerful impression to leave behind. It would solace her in her loneliness to remember how free from trouble he was at starting; but leaving her to desolation and solitude was dreary work, and it nearly upset the gentle boy, so considerate for any one's pain, the lowliest person who ever breathed, to say nothing of the sister whom he loved so dearly.

"I must just run and have a peep at Sultan," he said; "I will be back instantly."

But sooner than Muriel had thought it possible for him to return the door opened. She had shed a few tears, and was bathing her face in cold water

to send all traces of them away, not wishing Norman to see them.

"You have been quick, Nor, darling," she exclaimed, getting hold of a towel and rubbing her eyes briskly. "I never caught sight of you coming back, though I once looked out of the window."

A rustle of silk fell on her ears; she might have heard it sooner only for talking so rapidly. She dropped the towel, and there stood Mrs. Duerdon.

Face to face they confronted each other. The lady had a dark frown on her brow. Muriel stood silent, her only feeling being one of anxiety that the little remaining time she and Norman had to spend together should be swallowed up in this interview.

Mrs. Duerdon was the first to break the silence.

"Have you no word of apology—no contrition for your past bad behaviour, abandoned child; no sorrow or shame for your baseless conduct that you stand there speechless?"

Muriel spoke not; it was not because she would not, simply because she could not think what to say, she had been so taken by surprise. She stood, as she afterwards observed, as if in a dream. Yet all the while she was unconsciously noting clearly each article of dress Mrs. Duerdon wore, even to the tight-fitting lavender gloves and the gaily brocaded neckerchief round the throat. Ties were not so fashionable then. And this attention of Muriel's

was all the more extraordinary in that she so rarely noticed dress. It all came back to her later—the handsome black corded jacket of costly material, the purple silk dress gleaming in the sunshine, fashionably trimmed; the stylish bonnet of black lace, the pattern of the lace Muriel even remembered, and the grand ostrich feather, white and curling, which recalled Mr. Mervin's words, and made the girl smile even then.

Mrs. Duerdon caught that smile, but not guessing what caused it was angered by it, for which, perhaps, no one could have blamed her.

"Are you speechless, graceless child?" repeated Mrs. Duerdon, "or will you not speak?"

Owen, beautifully dressed, all velvets and laces, ran in. It was a fortunate diversion.

"Mamma, the carriage is coming to the door. Oh, Muriel," he said, "I have wanted you ever so bad, and there's been no Norman. I could not find you. "Why did you stay away?"

And he made a rush at her, to the detriment of newly smoothed hair and starched frills.

Muriel held out her arms; she was pleased to see the little fellow. In another instant they would have been kissing each other.

"Back, Owen!" almost screamed his mother. "Back, I say! I am not going to allow a child of mine to be touched by her."

Muriel drew herself up; the old stolid look of indifference returned. Owen began to whimper.

"Do not cry, pet," said Muriel kindly. "Murry has been a naughty girl, and Owen must not love her or kiss her."

A pang crossed the lonely heart as she spoke. It was only the love of a little child she was relinquishing, and yet it was hard. It was such a small amount of love she dare claim from any one beyond her brother.

"You not naughty," declared Owen bravely, "and I love you much. I will bring you something back from the pretty sea. I have plenty of silver pennies."

"Hush, child," muttered Mrs. Duerdon peevishly; "you are as bad as the rest. Go downstairs; I will join you presently."

Owen turned to go.

"Good-bye, Murry," said the little boy, kissing his hand after a fashion Spence had taught him. "Good-bye, Murry, and do not cry. Owen loves you ever so."

Strange that he should have so earnestly persisted in his declaration of affection. It was as if he were aware of Muriel's solitary position, and wished to comfort her.

"Good-bye, pet," answered Muriel, swallowing down a lump in her throat.

"It was my intention to have had a conversation with you, bad girl, pointing out your wickedness," said Mrs. Duerdon, "but I have left it too late; my time is, as you know, limited. Your imprisonment is at an end, Muriel Vivian. You

are free to roam at will over the house and grounds until my return, when a strict surveillance will be kept over all your doings. Miss Bradshaw has kindly undertaken to stay with you—a thankless office, I need scarcely remark, but one that she doubtless feels equal to. Make the most of your liberty; it is the last opportunity you will have for so doing for some time."

And without one word of farewell she sailed out of the room.

"I am glad I shall not see *you* again for the next few weeks," sighed Muriel; "you make the air oppressive to me; I am choked—stifled when you are near. Oh, Nor darling, where are you? She gives me my freedom just when I do not care for it. I wish she was somebody else's guardian instead of mine. I wish, oh, how I wish, that Mr. Duerdon had never seen her. She is so unjust, so cruel. Oh! how different it might all have been!"

Muriel's lamentations were cut short by Norman rushing in.

"Muny, I have not one minute," he said hurriedly. "There, there, darling, a hundred kisses for you. Write often, darling. I shall always be thinking of you, my Sis, and I will do everything I can to come back quickly."

"Norman, Norman," shouted a voice loudly.

"I am coming, Uncle Fred. There, Muriel, just one more kiss."

Parkyn came running into the schoolroom.

"The carriage will start, Master Norman, if you are not quick."

"I can come, too, and watch you off, Nor," said Muriel, hastening after her brother. "I have my freedom."

"That is a great comfort; I am truly thankful."

Mrs. Duerdon's face was a sight to see, all puckers and frowns, as Norman jumped in the carriage, and Mr. Duerdon did not look pleased, but he said nothing.

Norman kept up his pleasant smile to the last, and Muriel did the same, though her lip quivered. She watched the carriage bowling down the avenue until it was out of sight, and she waved her handkerchief and kissed her hand long after they could see her.

"Gone, gone," she sobbed. "Each moment removes him farther from me. What shall I do?"

And with a desolate cry the young girl turned into the deserted house.

The privilege of liberty so newly restored was of no moment. It was utterly valueless and useless now Norman was not there to share it. It was the first time in their lives they had ever been separated, and it was a great trouble. Some people might laugh at their being grieved over what to them would seem such a slight cause for distress. But we cannot measure troubles; what is a death-blow to one person might not affect another.

It was some days before Muriel could be at all consoled, although Miss Bradshaw was a kind friend, and did her best to comfort. But time, the great solacer, and Norman's bright, cheery letters roused her, and ere a week passed she began counting the days to Norman's return.

It was about this time Mrs. Mervin received a telegram summoning Caroline home. Mr. Danvers was much worse, in danger in fact; and a few days later a letter came saying that unless there was a marvellous change Caroline could not come back for an indefinite period; her mother would require her services.

This was unwelcome news to all. Miss Bradshaw wrote and acquainted Mrs. Duerdon with the news precisely as it was given to her. She considered it her duty so to do, though, in reality, the alteration affected that lady very slightly. In a few days she received a reply, in which Mrs. Duerdon stated that Miss Danvers' movements were perfectly immaterial to her, but that, owing to certain changes at Astley Park, Miss Bradshaw might consider her services concluded. Henceforth she would not be held responsible for Miss Vivian's education.

To say that Miss Bradshaw was perplexed and distressed on the perusal of this ungracious note would be but speaking lightly of her feelings. This sudden dismissal was a poor return for her many years' services. True, she had been paid,

but she had done many a thing in her singleness of heart and Christian rectitude that no money payment could set straight. Her very presence in the house now had been most inconvenient to her. But upset and grieved as she was at Mrs. Duerdon's ungrateful behaviour—for governesses are particularly dependent for their characters, and also upon every movement that may affect that character, and this sudden dismissal would tell seriously against her—yet she never murmured. She was in God's hands; it would be all right. She did not tell Muriel; the girl had enough to grieve her. She would leave it until Norman came home, and he would help her to bear it. Miss Bradshaw guessed, and rightly, that Muriel would be sorry. What Mrs. Duerdon's plans were for the future was a mystery, and a mystery to which the governess had no clue. Perhaps a new lady had been engaged to take Miss Bradshaw's place, or Muriel was going to be sent away to school. Whatever the arrangement was no one at present knew save Mrs. Duerdon herself, or if they did they never alluded to it. Miss Bradshaw could not help grieving that the happy days at the Vicarage were ended; that was the result of Caroline's call home, not of Miss Bradshaw's dismissal, but it would make the grievance none the less heavy for the motherless girl to bear when it should be made known to her, for as yet Muriel had no idea even that her young friend had gone

for longer than the holidays. This had been, by Mrs. Mervin's directions, kept from her. It was singular how every one conspired to keep the knowledge of trouble away; it was as if they saw she had already enough to bear.

"Let us be certain that Caroline cannot return before we tell Muriel," had been Mrs. Mervin's kind-hearted wish, "I myself yet think her mother will spare her; no need to give useless trouble."

And so Muriel had two unpleasant things to be told.

Whether this course of action was wise is very doubtful. Muriel was a good, sensible girl, with a strong, brave heart. She could endure with the most enduring, though only so young. Are not troubles better told as they come, even if they wound? They have to be borne, and most people can bear a weight that is gradually lowered on them better than they can bear a heavy blow suddenly given.

CHAPTER II.

The four weeks' stay at the seaside had lengthened into six, and still the Duerdons and suite were away. Muriel began to think her holidays were very long, and to wonder what Miss Bradshaw was about that she did not suggest a resumption of lessons. But she asked no questions, she supposed it had been so arranged by Mrs. Duerdon. Norman and Caroline were yet unable to come back, so she was to enjoy a further period of liberty. Muriel was quite willing that it should be so, though she was anxiously counting the days to her brother's return. It had got to Monday morning in the seventh week, and though Norman's letters arrived almost daily, no word so far had been mentioned that they might be expected. But on Monday there was a postscript to this effect—

"I almost begin to hope that we shall meet on Thursday. Mrs. Duerdon let a word or two drop that leads me to this conclusion. I may be mistaken, or she may change her mind, so that you must not buoy yourself up too greatly; but no words can tell my darling Muny how I long to see her again."

"Oh, Dickie, suppose it should be true," almost

sobbed Muriel, in delight, "suppose Norman should be back, would it not be glorious. It really would be like heaven. How ever have I lived without him so long. My brave and gentle brother."

"He very likely will come on Thursday," replied the governess, soberly. "But do not excite yourself needlessly, you may be disappointed. After all Muriel, it will only be the matter of a few days."

"A few days will seem like years," sighed Muriel, almost thoughtlessly in her excitement.

Miss Bradshaw for once felt hurt. The thought of her impending departure from the motherless girl, for whom she really cared deeply, and that girl's utter indifference to her companionship irritated her. She forgot that Muriel was ignorant of what lay before her.

"Am I nothing to you then, is my society so valueless?" demanded she, impatiently, "that you openly assert how dull your time has been?"

"Forgive me, Dickie, forgive me," exclaimed Muriel, in deep contrition. "I was very thoughtless. You have been such a good patient unselfish friend, and I can never repay you. But you see—now do not be offended—there is no one in the world like Norman. I love him so, he is my heaven, my sunshine, my all."

"Muriel," reproved Miss Bradshaw, gravely.

"In this world I mean," rejoined Muriel, in a low tone.

"Yes, dear, I presumed you meant so."

A great bustle and cleansing began to take place in different parts of the house during the day. Maids were busy in every direction. Brushes and pails were left standing waiting to be tumbled over. Dusters lay about to the utter distraction of the housekeeper, who said the work must be done with more order. There was a general smell of soap, and a loud sound of scrubbing, hidden only by the lively chatter of the girls.

"Signs of an approaching change," declared Muriel, joyously.

In the afternoon just before Miss Bradshaw's five o'clock tea, Alan Murray was announced. Muriel was astonished, she had forgotten that he was back at school. After his greetings were over he turned to Muriel.

"I have had a letter from Norman this afternoon," he said, "and he has enclosed one for you, asking me to get it sent before night, if I could not bring it. Ritchie however gave me leave, here it is," and he handed her a directed envelope.

"I scarcely understand," replied Muriel, slightly at sea. "I have had a letter from Norman, why should he send me another."

"Yours would be by the early post," spoke up Alan, in his offhand way. "We have a second delivery at Jycliffe, so that that letter will contain later news."

"Oh, thank you many times," said the girl, "please excuse me reading it."

There were only a few words—

"We are coming back *for certain* on Thursday. Everything is quite definitely settled. Hip, hip, hurrah!

"N. V."

"How good of him to set my mind at rest," said Muriel, "oh, how delightful it all is."

"I am glad to have been the bearer of good news," said Alan, gallantly. "I will thank my friend Vivian."

Muriel's spirits got very high after Alan's departure. She was overjoyed, she felt as if some weights would be desirable to keep her from flying, so light had she become.

On Tuesday afternoon she and Miss Bradshaw went to the Vicarage to tea. Not by invitation. They knew they were always welcome, and they were being moved about from room to room in the most disorderly fashion.

Mrs. Holmes, the housekeeper, excused herself by saying Mrs. Duerdon's notice of return had been too short. All cleaning was thrown into a muddle. Muriel laughed and averred "muddle" was the most descriptive word that could have been thought of.

The evening was a quiet one, Ernest was away, but returned in time to walk to the Park. It was nearly nine o'clock then, and the summer's evening air was calm and still, and they sauntered

along slowly, thoroughly enjoying it. Miss Bradshaw never could, on account of lameness, walk quickly, not even when she wished to hurry, but there was no necessity now.

They were surprised on reaching the lodge to find the large gates open. This was a most unusual occurrence even when the Duerdons were at home, therefore much more so when they were away, and the large carriage unused. The woman who took charge of the lodge was standing at the door, her baby in her arms. She curtsied as the party passed through.

Miss Bradshaw patted the little one, and inquired who had gone to the house. The idea struck her that Mrs. Duerdon, uncertain in her movements, had suddenly made up her mind to return home.

"No, ma'am," returned the woman, "it's not the family, but a lady with a lot of luggage. The cab has but just returned empty. I am waiting for my man to come and shut the gates. They are heavy, he always helps me when he can. He's only down the road a bit."

"A lady," repeated Muriel, mystified, "you must be mistaken. It will be a new servant probably; I had not heard of one coming though. They dress so grandly nowadays, it is difficult to distinguish them from ladies until they speak."

"I think, miss, this was not a servant," replied the woman, civilly. "The driver stopped here and inquired if he was right. I told him

yes, and the lady put her head out of the window and said—'This is not the house.' She was dressed real grand, and spoke like them there furriners over the water, I could scarcely make out what she said, and she did not quite understand me, and baby cried and made matters worse. I think she wanted to know if this was Mr. Duerdon's house, but she called it strange."

Muriel glanced inquiringly at Miss Bradshaw. That lady interpreted the look aright.

"You may hurry on and see who it is, if you are very anxious," she said, smiling, "I can make allowance for your curiosity. It would be cruel of me to condemn you to my slow pace."

"Thank you, Dickie. What fun it would be if some unknown and hitherto unheard-of relatives turned up."

A similar thought had struck Miss Bradshaw. Had she had any idea as to whom it was she would have kept Muriel by her side as long as she could. Muriel flew on—excitement lent her wings. The hall door was wide open; luggage inside in great quantities piled up high. There was far more than sufficient for one person—one ordinary person, at any rate. It was not a servant, that she decided; the boxes would have been taken round to a side entrance. Muriel looked round for Parkyn, he was not visible, and all was quiet, no unusual stir going on.

"It's strange the luggage should be left there,"

thought the girl. "Any one could tell the Duerdons were away. There is quite a change in our orderly household. Perhaps the servants are waiting to see there is no mistake, no egregious blunder which Miss Bradshaw on her return can set right." But Muriel was impatient. She could not wait for the mystery to be cleared, so she rushed into the nearest room, which happened to be the library, and but little used during Mr. Duerdon's absence, intending to ring the bell and ask for a few particulars from Parkyn. It was getting dusk, and the large heavy furniture added to the gloom, standing out grim and silent. A strange feeling of loneliness seized on Muriel, for the house was large, and she had not yet seen a single person since she entered it, neither had she heard a sound, so that she nearly screamed when she neared the sofa to find some one lying on it. But she was not accustomed to give strong vent to her feelings, being one of the undemonstrative kind, and a slight exclamation only escaped her. The expression of dismay roused the stranger, who jumped up quickly.

"Mille pardonne. Je vous demande pardonne," uttered the new-comer, with great volubility. "I vas not avare that you vas in de room."

And she bowed a great many times.

"Are you Mees Veven?"

Muriel bowed stiffly. She wondered to whom she was speaking, and said, "Yes, I am Miss

Vivian." She did not like the dark foreign face that peered so curiously into hers. "Whom have I the honour of addressing?" she asked.

"Non honneur point de tout. Je suis Mademoiselle Jeanne Loisel de Paris, votre gouvernante" (your governess), she explained.

A sweet smile stole over Muriel's face, a weight was lifted from her heart. "J'en suis bien fâchée Mademoiselle, mais il y a une méprise. I have a governess you see," she added, almost apologetically, "et je n'en ai besoin d'une autre. Will you tell me where you were directed to go and perhaps I can set you right?" And Muriel lapsed unconsciously into her own mother tongue again, for at present she was not a proficient in languages. "Miss Bradshaw, my governess, will be here directly. You must have come to the wrong house."

At this instant the hall door banged. It was either Parkyn closing it for the night or Miss Bradshaw returned. Muriel ran out quickly without waiting for Mademoiselle's reply. She found Miss Bradshaw wiping her feet on a mat. This was the force of habit, the roads outside being as dry as several weeks' uninterrupted fine weather could make them. She was quite unconscious of the absurdity.

"Dickie," exclaimed Muriel, running and clasping one of Miss Bradshaw's hands in a way entirely new, "there is a horrid French lady in the

library who has come by mistake. She is engaged to teach some pupils in the neighbourhood, and by some strange mismanagement has got here. Will you go and talk to her. She takes all my patience, and I do not like her."

"Foolish girl with foolish prejudices," said Miss Bradshaw. "It may be that there is no mistake, how then, Muriel?"

"It must be," answered the girl, smiling, "you are here, there is no room for any one else."

"I am here as a friend," pursued Miss Bradshaw, "as far as teaching goes you are at present free, you have no governess."

"Oh, Dickie!" cried Muriel in distress, "I do not understand the law in these things, can you give me up at a minute's notice?"

"I can be made to do so if paid for my three months," replied the governess, proudly.

"Oh, Dickie, do not torture me," replied the young girl. "My heart feels chill and cold, please go and see that—that creature."

Miss Bradshaw limped off. Muriel stood and gazed after her.

"What a stupid dolt I am," cogitated she, "Miss Bradshaw will never be turned off; yet what did she mean? I will not let that French idiot teach me—no, I will not let her teach me."

And Muriel kept repeating these words to herself as if she found comfort in them. Supper was laid in the dining-room when she entered it, and

the gas lighted. It was a plain, frugal meal. Cold meat, fruit tart, and bread and cheese, also a couple of glasses of cold milk, which both Miss Bradshaw and Muriel took in preference to beer. There was nothing that could harm in waiting. A few minutes and Miss Bradshaw joined her. She laid her hand kindly on Muriel's head—

"There is no misunderstanding as to Mademoiselle Loisel being your governess," she said, "Mrs. Duerdon has engaged her services. There is, however, some mistake which I cannot make out about her coming. She was not expected until next Friday, but unforeseen circumstances, as she puts it, obliged her to come sooner."

"And what is to become of you, Dickie?" asked Muriel, with a strange sinking at her heart. "Has Mrs. Duerdon as little regard for your well-being as she has for mine?"

"I am right enough," answered Miss Bradshaw, quietly. "I shall have to seek another post, and you are advanced enough in your studies, Muriel, to appreciate and value the teachings of a foreign lady."

Muriel looked up, a strange look on her face.

"You express no surprise, Dickie, not one word of complaint," uttered Muriel, in dissatisfaction. "You behave as if you had known about it all along. I verily believe you have, and you kept all knowledge of it from me until it came suddenly at one great blow. Are you unkind too, Dickie?"

There was great reproach in the words, but there was far more in the tone. Miss Bradshaw felt it keenly.

"I did it for the best, child, indeed I did," she answered, deprecatingly. "The best both for you and me. I trusted Norman would have been here to share the trouble with you whatever it might be."

"Where is Mademoiselle now?" questioned Muriel.

"She has gone to her bedroom, at least to a room until the housekeeper arranges which is to be hers."

"Long may she stay there," devoutly breathed Muriel. "What were the unforeseen circumstances to which she alluded?"

"The unexpected departure of her late employer for a foreign tour. Mademoiselle has no home, so in her dilemma came on here. She is full of apologies, and regrets her unannounced advent. I have ordered some supper to be taken to her room."

"I wish she had delayed a few days longer," sighed Muriel.

But Miss Bradshaw said nothing; she knew a few days made no difference.

On Thursday the family returned, and if the day that they went away was long, the one they came back was worse. Muriel declared it never would come to an end. It was the very longest

she had ever spent. She did all she could think of to welcome them back, even to placing some flowers on Mrs. Duerdon's dressing-table, which little attention that lady soon crushed by ordering them away. As however Muriel never knew that, she had some satisfaction in thinking she had done one little act to please her benefactress.

Norman had grown strong and ruddy again, and his eyes quite sparkled with pleasure as he turned them on his now happy sister.

"I have such lots of treasures for you, Muny," he averred with delight.

"And I have to thank you so much for your kind thoughtful arrangements for all my comforts before you left," answered Muriel warmly. "There was nothing you left unmentioned, even to your letters being brought to my bedroom."

Mrs. Duerdon made a great fuss over Mademoiselle Loisel, and regretted much that she had returned too late to give the Frenchwoman a polite reception. She boasted of her success in obtaining the services of such a clever instructress, and told Muriel to try and be properly thankful for such mercies. A Lady Louisa Lyde had wanted to engage her, and that enhanced her charms one hundredfold in Mrs. Duerdon's eyes. It was not as if she had been some obscure neglected governess whom nobody wanted, but a true Parisian, who was eagerly sought by a titled lady.

Norman was no more prepossessed in Made-

moiselle's favour than Muriel had been, and quite as ready to resent Miss Bradshaw's dismissal. However, as he wisely observed it was desirable that they should make the best of things. The new governess was there, and their dislike joined to all the grumbling in the world would only do harm instead of good. So Muriel, profiting by past experience, strove to obey without demur. And in spite of prejudices and presentiments Mademoiselle turned out much better than the Vivians expected. She was cold and unsympathetic to a certain extent, but at the same time she was unexacting and just. She made every allowance for the orphan girl, and sad to relate much allowance was at first needed. For, in spite of all her endeavours, Muriel could only get through her work in a most dull and methodical way. It was such a strong dose of duty without one grain of love to make it palatable. But if Mademoiselle did not give any love neither did she exact any, and so there was no *fracas*. Muriel at this time might have grown hard and selfish had she been deprived of Norman and his companionship. But school-hours over, Mademoiselle's work was done, and she was not one to linger upstairs whilst she had the privilege of entering the drawing-room. No, she loved grand dress and display and show too much. She was a woman after Mrs. Duerdon's own heart, and like all French people she really knew how to dress. When she was

gone Muriel and Norman were at liberty to roam at will. The firm hand, the restricted freedom that Mrs. Duerdon had threatened Muriel with had proved mere threats. In reality now the young girl had more liberty than before, for the lady of the house never interfered, and so she was left to Mademoiselle altogether. Mademoiselle taught Owen as well as Muriel. For a long time he got on very badly, and was generally taken out of the schoolroom in a screaming fit; but with perseverance and Muriel's intervention things proceeded more satisfactorily.

Miss Bradshaw could not meet with a suitable morning engagement, so she advertised and got a situation as companion to an elderly widow living near London. She gave up her cottage and furniture just as it was to a lady of small means, who promised to pay a trifling sum and to take care of everything as if it had been indeed her own. And this proviso and the annual payment sent quarterly were a great help to Miss Bradshaw. Thus all were satisfied, though that had most certainly not been Mrs. Duerdon's intention. She had, as she openly declared to Mr. Duerdon, wished to punish Muriel's obstinacy and waywardness, but in the comfort she derived from Mademoiselle's society she relinquished all thoughts of that dreadful girl. And decidedly Mrs. Duerdon and Mademoiselle were inseparable. It was amusing to watch them together—the one all life and volubility, the other

all languor and affectation. Hours they spent on the all-absorbing topic of dress; dress was the principal pivot on which all actions concerning Mrs. Duerdon turned. Mademoiselle knew this, and with all the manners and gesticulations of her country she accurately explained the minutest particulars. Mrs. Duerdon, with real, not assumed interest, listened. Many a time Dr. Green watched them in amazement; it was as good as a play he averred. With all his knowledge and experience of the world this was an entirely new phase of character. Never before had he met their equal, and greatly as he disliked the subject, and little as he could enter into it, he yet sat and listened an entranced witness and observer. He gave Mademoiselle Loisel credit for being one of the cleverest and most subtle of her sex, equal to any emergency and with great powers of adaptability. Crafty, cold, and somewhat sly, yet with a gift of manner that hid her disposition fairly well.

CHAPTER III.

All Hallows' Eve came wrapped in a thick mantle of fog and mist; a fog thick, dense—damp; a mist that penetrated to the very skin. A large party, composed of old and young, was collected at the Vicarage, Dr. Green, as usual, forming the life and merriment of all round games. They had had four plates, according to custom, containing a wedding ring, earth, water, and a brush. Each person was blindfolded, and twice led up to the plates to try their luck in the future. Mademoiselle had twice touched the brush, much to her horror. She protested loudly against the old maid's fate, and said they had no unmarried ladies in their country. And amidst much laughter she demanded to be again blindfolded. Still with the same success, and then she declared there was nothing in these games. Norman openly agreed with her, when, with similar luck, he twice touched the earth. "Who more unlikely to die than he full of youth and strength!" Muriel could not be persuaded to try; she said Norman's luck had made her shiver. Dr. Green, anxious to make a diversion, proposed having the handkerchief tied over his eyes. Every one was surprised at his proposition, the

more so that only a few minutes previously he had loudly inveighed against such proceedings, but the good man knew what he was about; scarcely was he blindfolded, and every one on the tip-toe of expectation, than he startled them all by shouting, "Blind-man's-buff," and he raced with outstretched arms in all directions. The doctor's spirits were infectious; he was like a schoolboy let loose.

All entered into the fun with zest, and the commotion was great. Mrs. Mervin played for a few minutes, and then ran panting in a corner, but the doctor romped on. His face was crimson, his hair damp, and the perspiration rolled down his face in large drops.

In the midst of this he was summoned away; he was wanted, there was an urgent case demanding his presence.

Snatching off the handkerchief that was bound round his head, the doctor mopped his face and hair, and, unheeding the cries of "Let Mr. Ashworth go," out into the hall he rushed.

A man, short and thick, with a careworn face, stood waiting.

Dr. Green went up to him, still wiping away the perspiration, and asked what he wanted.

The man touched his hat, and drew him aside.

After a few hurried whispers, the doctor spoke up—

"All right, Garner; I will come myself. Wait

an instant, I must get my hat, and we can walk together."

"Your coat too, doctor," said Mrs. Mervin, who had followed him out. "Do not go just yet; look how hot you are, and you so subject to colds and bronchitis. Pray stay a while, doctor, I beseech you."

She laid her hand on his arm in entreaty as she spoke.

"I must go at once," he said firmly. "It is a matter of life and death. I will return if I can."

"I am sorry that you are in such a heat," continued Mrs. Mervin persistently; "there seems danger to me in going out into the raw damp, more especially for you, doctor."

"Pooh, pooh, I am all right," returned the doctor impatiently; "you are only delaying me, my dear madam."

"Scarcely," she replied; "see, there your coat is on. Wrap that warm muffler of Mr. Mervin's round your throat, and I will run and fetch you a glass of something hot."

The doctor took the muffler in his hand, and the man moved on to the mat nearer to the door.

"I will not be two minutes," said Mrs. Mervin. "Now do please stay. It would be nothing short of madness if you ventured out in this state of heat."

"Nevertheless it must be done," replied the

doctor sternly. "Tut, tut, I do not take cold so easily as you imagine. Medical men are accustomed to changes of temperature."

"Well, do not be obstinate," urged Mrs. Mervin with unusual pertinacity; "if you really cannot stay, let me fetch something to keep out the fog."

The doctor appeared to hesitate, and Mrs. Mervin moved off briskly, glad to avail herself of even that slight permission.

When she returned, in less than her stipulated time, with two glasses of hot steaming mixture, the doctor and man had both disappeared. Mr. Mervin's muffler was lying on a chair, but no one was to be seen. Dr. Green had spelt opportunity. Mrs. Mervin was exceedingly annoyed.

"How tiresome and obstinate," she exclaimed aloud. "I would not have had him go out like that for five pounds. He will be sure to take cold. Look at that dreadful attack of bronchitis he had last winter, when no one expected him to recover. How perverse and wayward he is! George would be much easier managed; I will go and tell him."

Mr. Mervin was smoking quietly in his sanctum. Not all the din and merriment, had it been ten times greater, would have disturbed him.

He listened in quiet silence to all his wife's remarks.

"Never mind, Fanny," he responded mildly.

"Do not you distress yourself. Dr. Green is old enough, and wise enough too, I should hope, to look after himself."

"I do not know, George; men are poor creatures."

"Aye, aye," agreed the good man, tapping the contents of his pipe on to the bar. "We must make the best of them."

"And a poor best it is," muttered Mrs. Mervin in unusual irritation.

It was seldom she was put out, but the doctor's defalcations really grieved her kind heart.

"I must go to the players," continued she presently; "we must have quiet games now, or else others will be going out like Dr. Green did, bathed in perspiration."

Mrs. Mervin's fears were only too well grounded.

The doctor was unable to return that evening, and the next day, All Saints', he was shivering and miserable with a violent cold.

On the sixth of November, Owen's birthday, there was generally a large dinner party at Astley Park—a grand annual event to which the doctor always went. Invitations on a grand scale had been issued a few days previously, and Dr. Green had accepted, as he was almost in honour bound to do.

Now, knowing how long a cold lingered with him, especially a severe one such as he seemed to have got, he felt he ought to write and decline.

These invitations were eagerly sought after by a certain set. He would do well to give up his place, so a note was sent.

Mrs. Duerdon, however, would not take a refusal. She laughed at the idea of a cold upsetting a strong man to that extent. Delicate women or young children were different. A bachelor's whim she termed it. Bachelors always were crusty on some points; this must be Dr. Green's. If the worst came to the worst, and the doctor could not come—highly improbable, but still it might be so—Mademoiselle would take his place at the dinner table—Mademoiselle, with her right idea of things, with her correct taste and unerring judgment.

And so it was left an uncertainty.

There are men big and burly with the strength of a lion and indomitable courage, who succumb like a child to the least cold at the chest. Dr. Green was one of this kind. A cold was the only thing he dreaded. He became a prisoner to the house at once, leaving all his patients to Mr. Ashworth's care.

Dr. Green stayed in the house, but there his precautions ended; he would not go to bed, neither would he at first consent to stay in his bedroom with a nice fire, as he knew he ought to do to escape the draughts. A poor patient was Dr. Green. He could give good advice easily, but he could not take it.

One of his earliest visitors in these to him dreary days of confinement was Mrs. Mervin. She came to scold him well, and, if in spite of her sorrow at his illness a small feeling of triumph reigned in her breast at her far-seeing prevision, who can blame her?

"It's every bit your own fault, doctor," she said, shaking her head, "and I feel very angry with you. Why did you not take my advice? How would it be if I went out in a thick fog?"

They were sitting in the same room in which Norman lay after he sprained his ankle, the same small apartment that the Vivians had both cheered so long by their presence.

Dr. Green pointed to the window for answer. His voice was hoarse, and he spared it as much as possible.

"Ah, yes, I know what you mean," assented Mrs. Mervin. "It is bad enough to-day, rather like a general washing-day steam, outside. Bad enough truly, but nothing to that All Hallows' Eve. Besides look at the heat you were in. Going without the muffler too," as she remembered the last grievance. "Oh, doctor, it was too bad of you."

"It made no difference," croaked the invalid; "I never wrap my throat up. Don't believe in such weaknesses."

"Better perhaps if you did," corrected Mrs. Mervin. "But come, I won't scold you any more.

We must try and nurse you well now. See, I have brought you some jelly, some of my own making. Will you take a little?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Not now, by-and-bye."

"That will not do for me, doctor."

And wise woman as she was, Mrs. Mervin persuaded him to eat a little while she stood by.

"Just a little; there!" and then the good woman left.

She would have stayed, but she feared to be in the way. She did not understand the doctor's manner, good friends as they were. He was fretful and irritable, as people are who generally enjoy strong robust health. He was not annoyed with her; he would in reality have been grateful for her society; he was angry and fidgety with himself. But this she did not understand. He had not the same patience to bear illness as those who were generally weak. The more accustomed we are to suffer the more patiently we bear it.

Mrs. Mervin promised to send her husband the next day.

That night Norman and Muriel came to tea self-invited. Norman had asked permission from Mrs. Duerdon. She was going out that evening, and when he made his request she had ungraciously said they could go where they liked, their movements were of not the smallest consequence to her.

So they went. They would never have known Dr. Green was ill only for Martha's forethought. She had stopped Norman on his way to school, saying—

"Summat was to do with master; he were noan gradeley. Would Master Norman be pleased to look in."

And ungracious as Mrs. Duerdon's consent was, it still was consent, and the Vivians rejoiced.

"Do not tell Dr. Green we have come," pleaded Muriel; "show us into the room unannounced."

"He will be rare and fain," answered the woman, glancing kindly at the two bright faces. But when she opened the door, she said, "A lady and gentleman to see you, sir."

"Confound their impertinence!" muttered the doctor, and the Vivians, both keen of hearing, caught the sentence.

Dr. Green was seated in the parlour near the fire in a large old-fashioned chair. Such a monster chair, as it was large and roomy, just such as our forefathers rejoiced in. It was covered with a large flowered gaudy-coloured chintz composed of birds with wonderful plumage.

The doctor rose stiffly out of the chair. He was prepared for intrusive strangers when his two young friends jumped in on him. It was a great relief.

"Umph, umph," said he, trying to hide his pleasure, "where have you two sprung from? Nobody sent for you."

"But we have come," chuckled Muriel in glee.

Away from Mrs. Duerdon Muriel often became a lively girl.

"So I see," said the doctor in a hoarse whisper. "You are anxious, I suppose, to catch this dreadful cold. Off home with you both again. A couple of sillies who never know when they are well off."

Muriel looked slightly alarmed, not so Norman.

"We are not going home," said the boy brightly. "We are both sorry you have taken cold, but we have come to nurse you, and to spend one of our delightful evenings with you. We will talk, and you shall listen, one on each side of you."

"You have chosen a strange time for a pleasant evening," growled the doctor; "however you can stay if you dare. I like to see both your cheerful faces. Are you not afraid of taking cold?"

"Not in the least, Dr. Green; we would rather be here than anywhere. We both love to be with you, dear friend," and Norman laid his hand lovingly on the doctor's arm.

It was rarely any one showed affection for Dr. Green; that is, real, honest, hearty affection and its display.

The doctor was touched. Tears moistened his eyes, and it was good to see the look he gave Norman.

"Ye are both truly welcome here, bairns."

"We know it well," answered Norman. "But look, doctor, your food is getting cold."

He pointed to a large breakfast cup which stood on a round table by the doctor's side.

Dr. Green pushed it away from him, and made a grimace.

"It's quite cold already, I cannot touch it."

"May I go and warm it?" asked Muriel gently, "or get Martha to make you something fresh?"

"Ah, yes, be off to your cooking once more, and take this mess into the kitchen," answered the doctor. "Stay though; better than all get Martha to send one of her nice teas in. I'm hungry, starved to death. She keeps me half fed directly I get a cold. Sad mistake—'starve a fever, feed a cold,' eh? Is that wrong? Well, let us have a substantial tea."

Muriel ran off, and the doctor was silent for a minute.

"Do you think, Dr. Green, that you ought to take food?" inquired Norman, in anxiety. "Your throat sounds hoarse. Can you swallow?"

"Let every man stick to his last," reproved Dr. Green. "I'll never tell anybody again that I feel ill, see if I do. They form plots and conspiracies to starve me. I'll take no more of these detestable slops."

But when tea came in the doctor joined most sparingly in it. The exertion to swallow was

evidently too great, though he did not allude to it. His enjoyment of the meal was composed of delight at having his young friends with him, and pleasure at seeing they were really enjoying themselves. After tea he grew quite lively, though speaking much was a difficulty. He alluded to their visit at Christmas.

"We will have no disappointments this time," he said. "No refusals, no excuses. All right down good doings. No illnesses, or pretences; they shall not go down with me. I bespoke a splendid turkey the other day, a rare fat gobbler, strutting about. He will make a grand Christmas dinner. Norman, call and have a look at him, he's a fine bird in Farmer Greaves' yard. He will be proud to show you his poultry."

Norman nodded his head. He went by the farm every day on his way to school.

"Aye, I will call and have a look," he said. "Muriel, please fetch that *Illustrated News* out of my pocket. Dr. Green is getting tired, and we can read to him."

The doctor examined the pictures with interest, and then suffered the Vivians to read aloud. He fell asleep, but they did not stop. Muriel was going to do, but a reassuring nod and sign from Norman, and she went on. Then Norman took his turn, and so well did the children exert themselves, that Dr. Green awoke only just as they were leaving. His irritability had disappeared, nd he seemed more himself.

"Why bless my soul," he said, rousing himself, "I believe I have been to sleep."

"We have been reading aloud, doctor," said Norman.

Muriel did not look up. She was afraid of the answer which her expressive face might give.

"Umph, reading aloud have you, and you never found out I was asleep," said the doctor, unsuspiciously.

"We shall have to be going now. Good-night, Dr. Green," said Norman.

"Must you be off. I shall go out to-morrow if I keep like this," announced Dr. Green, quite cheerfully. "Wrap up well, bairnies. God bless you both. You have comforted the lonely old man to-night. Mind you come again soon."

It was seldom he called himself an old man; never unless to those who knew him well.

"Guy Fawkes day will soon be here," said Norman, "we will come then if we can manage it. We shall see something of the fireworks from here."

"Aye, aye, and we will have some ourselves," assented the doctor, cheerfully, "Ashworth and you can let them off. But don't wait until then to run in and see me. Come as often as you can. Be off and take care of each other."

John appeared lantern in hand.

"That's right, John," remarked his master, approvingly, "walk home with our bairns."

"Yes, master," replied John, "I thought you

would wish it, sir. I know you think there's nothing in this world so precious. Come on young master and miss."

The doctor's improvement unfortunately was not lasting. The next day he was worse, his throat and chest were sore, his voice hoarse, and he himself thoroughly prostrate.

Mr. Mervin called, and was grieved to find his friend of many years so languid and low.

"Why Green," he remarked, in astonishment, "you are thoroughly ill. This must be surely more than a cold that you have got. It's more like a fever. You are quite weak and ill."

"What bosh you talk, Mervin," said the doctor, irritably. "Much you know of illness. *Only* a cold, what will you tell me can be worse than a right down thorough-going cold. Why, man, it is the beginning of more than half the deaths in the world one way or another."

Mr. Mervin fidgeted.

"Come, come, Green," he said, coaxingly, "you like to exaggerate a little. You are imposing on my ignorance."

"Oh, am I," retorted the doctor, more contemptuously than politely, "I know better. A cold and its consequences is all that ever comes near me. I might term myself a man of iron were it not for my chest. I always dread bronchitis, it knocks me up completely, prostrates me, leaves me as weak as a cat. Bah! what's that?"

The doctor alluded to a knock at the door. It was Martha. She carried a small round waiter in her hand.

"More slops?" interrogated the doctor.

"No sir, it's tickets from the Park," replied Martha, holding out the waiter.

"Tickets!" repeated Dr. Green. "Ah! Mr and Mrs. Duerdon's cards, with kind inquiries on. Bah! what nonsense!"

"A nice little proper attention," spoke up the Vicar.

"A nonsensical humbugging rubbish!" retorted the doctor, angrily throwing the cards from him. "If people don't care to take the trouble to come and see one, what's the use of sending their servants. Bah! the things are not in the fire."

"Do you want them putting there?" inquired the Vicar, mildly.

"I do," answered Dr. Green, wrathfully. "No nonsense for me."

"Do you feel ill?" asked Mr. Mervin, soothingly, "I wish you had taken my wife's advice, and not rushed out into the damp air that fearful night."

"Tut, tut," said the doctor, fretfully, "I have heard enough of that. When will the matter die? I wish Norman Vivian was here. He has twice as much sense as any one else."

"He is a nice boy," agreed the Vicar, equably. "But cheer up, doctor; your cold will soon be

better. You look ill, but you won't die. It will take something stronger than a cold to finish you off. You are too serious, doctor. You are a strong man."

"Who said I was not?" answered the doctor, sharply. "You suggest such extraordinary, such preposterously out-of-the-way things. I am not ready to turn up my toes to the daisies yet a while, I assure you. Not to please you or anybody."

Mr. Mervin was startled. He was a mild man accustomed to quiet speaking.

"Bless my heart, Green, what a strange speech. I never met your equal. Where did you meet with that last quaint saying, may I inquire?"

Dr. Green shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Can't say, never remember where I hear things. Bah, man, you do not visit all the queer people I do, or you would hear some startling facts at times."

Mr. Mervin made no reply to this. Dr. Green jerked out his watch, opened it, wound it up, and put it back in his pocket.

"At your favourite occupation," remarked the Vicar, smiling, "I always wind my repeater directly after evening prayers. The servants come in regularly at ten, unless of course something unforeseen happens to prevent it, and directly they file out before going to bed, I take out my watch and wind it up, so that I never forget it."

"Ah, a man of quiet regular habits," replied

the doctor, contemptuously. "I never did live by rule, could not even had I wished, which I did not. There seems something very monotonous about such regularity."

"Perhaps hardly as much so as you think," dissented Mr. Mervin, quietly. "You have not the same chance that we clergy have for living by rule. But one thing you have done, Green, with a regularity that no one could have beaten you in—done it for over thirty years."

The doctor looked incredulous.

"Ah, you may look, Green, but I assure you my statement is correct. I allude to something you do every Sunday morning."

"Come to church, ah, yes, I make a point of that, though by the way Vicar I am no saint."

Dr. Green's tone was complacent. He spoke rather as if it were a merit.

"I believe you to be a good God-fearing man," said Mr. Mervin, solemnly. "Green, I understand you. But I was not exactly referring to your going to church. No, I alluded to something you always do during the sermon."

"Pshaw, bosh, go to sleep you mean; well, yes, I do that."

"You do something more worthy of note," pursued the quiet Vicar. "You have an extraordinary habit that has put me out, I am ashamed to say, many times."

"Bah, you never mean winding my watch, eh?"

hum! you do. Well it is simply to while away the time. You parsons impose on us so, preach such jolly long sermons, I get the fidgets. I do indeed. Suppose we make a compromise, you give us twenty minutes, and I will sit quiet, quiet as any—bless my life what should I say, quiet as a lamb, quieter. Ah, a child, a woman, goodness quieter than anything I can think of—a stone—there!"

The doctor's final "there" was quaintly triumphant.

"We will see," responded Mr. Mervin. "No rash promises. Make haste and get well, Green, and then we will talk about concessions. Can you listen to a chapter now?"

"I can read for myself," retorted the doctor, hoarsely. "Mervin, you forget yourself, I have only a cold, you would like to put me on the dying list, I verily believe."

"I read to all," replied the Vicar, meekly. "But as you truthfully remark you can do it for yourself."

"Or else get my boy Norman to do it for me," interrupted the invalid, fretfully.

"Yes, truly, or get Norman Vivian to do it for you. Well, I leave it in good hands. Good-bye, doctor. Mind you soon get well. Nurse your cold to some purpose. For as I before remarked both my wife and myself blame ourselves in some measure for its coming."

"What will you try and blame yourselves with next?" questioned the doctor. "Was it your fault that the fog was so dense on All Hallows' Eve. Were you to blame that Garner's old father was taken so bad. Or had you forgotten to send to the clerk of the weather office? Eh? eh? It is good to hear you."

"Good or not," replied the Vicar, slightly huffed, "it was in leaving our house in the hot state you did that brought on this bad cold."

"You are a good fellow, Mervin," laughed the doctor. "Do not blame yourselves in the slightest degree for my illness. Your wife did her best to keep me, would have done so by force had I not bolted. Made me put on a thick coat, and wanted me to take a glass of something hot. Wish I had followed her advice instead of running away as I did. No one's fault but my own, I was very obstinate."

The recollection of the whole affair tickled the doctor's fancy, he laughed again.

"I cheated your wife, Mervin. No old friend. My illness is due to no one but to my own foolhardiness, my own want of caution. I will be more careful in future."

He sank back wearied with exhaustion. The exertion of talking had been too great. Mr. Mervin left.

"Strange man, funny notions," soliloquized the Vicar. "Solitary and lonely too, it seemed cruel

to leave him. Pity he never married. What should I have done without Fanny? life would indeed have been a blank."

That afternoon on his way home from school Norman looked in. Dr. Green's eyes were closed, he was taking a nap, so closing the door very gently, Norman stole away. The next evening he appeared again.

"Alone are you?" said the doctor, "how is that?"

He was still sitting in his arm chair, a large old dressing gown over him.

"Where is Muriel? not afraid of the old man, eh?"

"Oh dear no. She has the face-ache badly, and is in great trouble over it, principally I believe because it keeps her from you. I left Mademoiselle poulticing. I scarcely liked leaving her."

"That I'll be bound you did not," said Dr. Green, laughing. "I wonder she ever got you here. She'd hard work I know."

Norman echoed the laugh.

"I hope you are better, Dr. Green?"

"I do not feel much better yet, my boy. A cold will have its run. No party for me on Owen's birthday. Will you tell Mrs. Duerdon so? No fireworks either for me to-morrow night, you and Ashworth must manage alone. I told him to order some."

"Not to-morrow night, unless you are better,"

said Norman, quietly. "I would rather wait until you and Muriel are well enough to join."

It was a quiet evening, the doctor dozed repeatedly as people suffering from a heavy cold are apt to do. Norman did not disturb him. He had a small book—Latin—in his pocket that he kept bringing out and studying. He left shortly after nine meaning to devote a short time to his sister. Dr. Green went to bed almost directly after Norman had gone.

The next day, the famous fifth of November, was again foggy. Some people kept gas burning all day, so dark and gloomy was it. On the sixth Norman had a half-holiday to commemorate Owen's birthday. He paid a short visit to Dr. Green who was at last sitting in his room upstairs. A large fire burned in the grate, the same old-fashioned chair was there, with the small round table in front.

"I do not feel any worse," he declared, in answer to his inquiries, "but neither do I feel any better, so I fancied there really might be some draughts downstairs which impeded my recovery, and as I cannot stir out of doors, I made up my mind to stay here."

He was still very hoarse, but his throat and chest, he said, were easier. His voice somehow reminded one of a muffled drum. He was speaking of the long-talked-of visit at Christmas, when a slight sound disturbed him.

"What's that?" he asked, stopping abruptly.

A pause. The door opened and Muriel came in, very well wrapped up. She hastened to the doctor with outstretched hands.

"That is right, my bairnie," said he, kindly. "Slip off these wraps and make yourself at home."

She threw off her large shawl, and said—

"My face-ache is better, and Mademoiselle gave me permission to come out, if I kept this flannel round my face."

"You did not come alone?" inquired Norman.

"I did. I was not in the least afraid, I ran all the way. Crowds of people are about for the fireworks. Is your throat better, Dr. Green?" asked Muriel, gently.

"Slightly so, Muriel," answered Norman, "but we must talk for the kind doctor."

"It does not sound better," said Muriel, incredulously. "I never heard any one speak so thickly and indistinctly."

"No compliments, young lady," croaked the doctor. "By the way will you convey my respects to that subtle Mademoiselle of yours, and ask her to take my place at dinner to-morrow night. I feel infinitely obliged to her for her amiability, I'm sure."

"There is no need," replied Muriel, not altogether kindly. "She is only too pleased to have the chance; she has some wonderful finery to display."

"Ah, Muriel," cautioned the doctor, holding up a finger warningly, "do not you ever be led away by the love of dress. It has got into a terrible failing now-a-days. The rage for it has become a small insanity. Women squander fortunes yearly on the adornment of their own bodies; money that would save another creature from starving—money alas! that is often not their own. Take warning my dear. I am not speaking against any one being nicely and becomingly dressed, but against that illimitable display. You catch my meaning, Muriel?"

He feared he had unintentionally wounded the girl's feelings.

"Perfectly," replied Muriel, good-humouredly; "the love of dress is not my failing, Dr. Green. My fault, I fear, lies the other way in not caring sufficiently for it."

"Equally bad in its way, equally bad. Slovenly and careless people are greatly to be avoided."

He began to get fidgety, and Norman and Muriel stole away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE next evening Norman looked in on his way from school.

"I have another dull night before me," lamented the doctor. "I wish you could manage to spend it with me, Norman; but it's impossible, is it not?"

"Not at all," answered the boy. "I will go to Mrs. Duerdon and tell her you would like me to be with you."

"No, no, Norman, it would not do. Duty before pleasure."

"Oh, let me go and ask," pleaded the boy eagerly. "I do not like you to be dull here, and I shall not be missed at the party."

"I don't know that I want you," replied Dr. Green, with all an invalid's variableness of mood. "I shall be better alone."

"You do not mean it," said Norman brightly. "Oh! Dr. Green, I know you do not mean it?"

"You are right, my boy," answered Dr. Green huskily. "I would have you with me always and it could be managed. I must make haste and get well, Norman. Have you seen the turkey yet, my boy? Such a beauty. Won't we walk into him at Christmas, eh! Ah, well, run home now, and give me an hour this evening if you can."

The doctor laughed at this speech until tears rolled down his cheeks. Norman left him thus, wiping the tears away and blowing his nose violently with a large handkerchief something the size of a small counterpane, and bursting out laughing afresh every now and then.

"I am glad the thoughts of Christmas amuse him so much," thought Norman. "He will not feel so lonely."

Norman kept his word, at least as far as he was able. Mrs. Duerdon would not let him off altogether. It was scarcely to be expected. The bright, handsome lad was in great request everywhere. He was so cheerful and buoyant. But she spared him sooner than she would have done for any one else. Muriel would dearly have loved to have accompanied her brother, but she knew she could not get off. She contented herself with fastening a large white chrysanthemum in his buttonhole.

"Not that it can improve you, Nor," she said lovingly. "You set it off."

"Send Dr. Green one," suggested Norman. "He is a great lover of flowers."

Muriel ran off and returned with another. She held it up—a dark ruby-coloured one. Norman took it from her, and put it close to his own, comparing the two critically.

"I wonder which is the prettier," he mused.

"The ruby-coloured, Nor, decidedly. You must keep it for yourself."

"Fie, Muny; let our good friend have the best. He is alone and ill," said Norman, persuasively. "You can give me another any time."

"Très bien," assented Muriel, slightly reluctant. "The doctor will soon be well again, Nor, and I always like you to have the best."

Norman touched the one in his buttonhole.

"I would rather have this, Muny," he said. "It reminds me somehow of you," and he looked at her.

She was dressed in a pretty white leno, trimmed with white satin ribbons, a small piece round her throat, and a wide sash. There was not much trimming; the principal impression she gave was of a pale, floating cloud, hazy and colourless.

"Reminds you of me!" she echoed, in astonishment.

"Yes; it is so white, and pure, and sinless."

"Oh, Norman, you must not think that way of me," she said earnestly. "Just to show you how very much mistaken you are, I will make a confession—an ignominious confession. I have been watching those two Miss Durrants over there, those two girls with red hair, near the piano; and I have been congratulating myself that I have not their foolish giggle and their frivolous ways."

"Well," said Norman, "and what does that prove? Simply that your views coincide with mine."

"Stop, Nor, I have not finished yet. I actually

—do not be shocked—I actually thought myself better-looking, nicer, more"—

"So you are, a hundred thousand times nicer," interrupted her brother with pride. "I should just think so. You are a pale, pure snowdrop, and they are gaudy, showy peonies."

"Oh, Norman, do hush," begged Muriel, "you will look at me in the wrong light. I am vain and weak and foolish; do not encourage me. If you could look into my heart as God does, you would not find it pure and white and sinless, but oh so black and dark."

"I do not think so, dear Muny," dissented Norman. "I think you are as nearly perfect as it is possible to be."

Muriel shook her head sadly.

"Love is proverbially blind," was all she said.

Norman laughed.

"Good-night, sweet sister; may I take your love with this flower to Dr. Green. I must hurry off."

"My best—stay, not my best, but my warm, kind love to the doctor; and tell him I hope to come soon."

As Norman was leaving the room Mrs. Duerdon beckoned him to her.

"Will you see Mrs. Holmes," she whispered, "and tell her to send Dr. Green anything she thinks he will fancy—a pheasant, or some dainty nicely cooked. Poor fellow, he can scarcely get it pro-

perly done in his doll's house, I should think. Convey my regrets to him, and say we hope for better tidings to-morrow."

A tall gentleman came up, and Norman went away. Mrs. Duerdon had not actually told Norman to take the things, merely to give the order. But he knew from her wording of the message that she would not object. So highly elated and proud of his basket, Norman started on his way. He had not seen the things put up, but he knew it was something good. He found Dr. Green very restless; his face hot and flushed, and he himself tired and worn. He was still in his bedroom, but the confinement seemed to have told on him.

"I am sick to death of staying indoors," he grumbled, "satiated with my own society, weary of the monotony. There are you all enjoying yourselves, and I here with this nasty cold. I'll stay in no longer, I'll be off."

He jumped up, and tore round the room backwards and forwards, his wide dressing-gown flying in all directions.

Norman stared at him in amazement; this was an entirely new character.

"You are better, Dr. Green," he exclaimed. "You must be getting stronger to walk about like that. I *am* glad. You will be able to drive out to-morrow. Your voice, too, sounded better, or I fancied so."

"I have a load on my chest, Norman, like a ton of coals. Tear it off, my boy; it weighs me down."

"Sit in your chair, doctor; I know you will knock yourself up. Garner the little strength you have gained."

Dr. Green stopped in his walk, stood and looked at Norman. It was a strange look, and Norman's face suddenly fell. He got up, arranged the cushions in the large armchair, and then tried to lead the doctor to it. For one minute there was a slight resistance, but only one. Dr. Green walked as obediently as a child.

"There, now," said Norman, soothingly, placing him comfortably down, "sit still and you will be all right."

But it was a strange way, the doctor went on, if he were all right. He panted and puffed and tore at his dressing-gown.

"Air, more air," he gasped.

Norman ran to the door and opened it, then took a book and fanned the doctor. A few seconds and he became calm again, though evidently much exhausted.

"Oh, Dr. Green!" said Norman, in great distress, "you have overtired yourself. I had no idea how weak you were. Why, oh why, did you walk about the room as if you were so strong again? Please send for Mr. Shaw at Jycliffe."

"Shaw, bosh!" panted the doctor. "What

would be the good of seeing him? What could he do, the noodle! I am better than ten Shaws yet, the young puppy!"

"Young!" echoed Norman, in surprise. "He must be over fifty."

"Knows nothing," retorted Dr. Green, contemptuously. "The fact is, Norman, he did look in this morning. Some one had officiously told him I was ill, and he came to give me his advice. His advice! pshaw! I would as soon take advice from a walking-stick,"

"He meant it kindly," suggested Norman.

"Never you mind what he meant," replied the doctor irritably, "that's my business. Do not judge others by yourself." Then he added more kindly, "Bah! no one could do me any good. I have got a cold, and it clings to me tenaciously like a leech, that's all, boy. Time and patience are its two best remedies."

"I never thought a cold was such a dreadful thing," observed Norman meditatively. "It's as bad as a fever, if not worse."

"You are not singular in your ignorance, Norman. I am suffering from bronchitis now; but I want no doctor near me. I am getting weary of everything."

"I wish you would go to bed," remarked Norman presently. "Take a nap, and I will read."

"Go to bed, fiddlesticks!" retorted the doctor

angrily. "Do you think people can sleep day and night? It's just like you youngsters. Must I go to bed to get a nap? No, not if I know it. What's that you say you brought from Mrs. Duerdon: anybody would have thought Martha would have brought some of it in. I believe you are all in a conspiracy to starve me."

"Oh, yes; I quite forgot about it in the flurry. Please let me fetch a piece of pheasant, Dr. Green," begged Norman earnestly.

"Ring the bell."

Norman obeyed. Martha appeared with the usual breakfast cup, on a small tray.

"I was just a-coming, sir," remarked Martha graciously.

"Coming with what? Some more slops, I'll be bound," said the doctor testily. "A little hot water with pepper and salt in it. A fine thing to get up one's strength."

"A nice little drop of beef tea, sir: real, good and strong, with a wee smack of brandy in it to revive you, and some pieces of toast cut up small to help it all down," said Martha, in her most coaxing way, as if talking to a child, yet anxiously watching his face the same time.

"Take it away, take it away," said the doctor, waving his hand impatiently. "For one week have I existed on such slops as that; you cannot call it lived. I have managed to gulp it down somehow. Bah! it's food good enough for old

women and babies, but I'll none of it. A pheasant or a partridge now, with bread sauce and gravy."

"We have not one in the house, sir. Could you fancy a fried fish, or perhaps "—

"I think Martha, I brought some game," interrupted Norman. "Mrs. Duerdon gave orders for it through me."

"None has come, Master Norman. There's jellies and sweets of all kinds, but no game; and master don't care for sweets."

Martha put the tray on the round table, and rubbed her hands slowly together as if the food would do in a week's time.

"What's the time?" inquired Dr. Green abruptly.

"It must be nearly ten," said Norman. "It was getting late before I came."

"Cook that sole, Martha, as quickly as you can, and lay supper for two here. Quick mind, I feel tired. A bit of pheasant now, how I could have enjoyed it."

Norman, ever solicitous of the comforts of others, immediately proposed running home to beg some from Mrs. Holmes.

"I will be back in a couple of minutes, Dr. Green, and I should enjoy the run."

Dr. Green looked at him gratefully.

"I will have it to-morrow, Norman," he whispered.

Martha hurried off on her errand.

"Fine whims the master takes in 'is 'ead," she

mumbled. "I hope he'll soon be well again. His appytight is better anyway, for he seems 'ungry. Good sign, though I ain't fond of cooking at nights. Sarah gone out, too, the work comes 'eavy."

The fish was soon fried, cod, and not sole as the doctor had fancied; but, he did not remark the difference. Martha was very proud of her cooking; and after she had arranged everything to her satisfaction, she remarked—

"It dew look beautiful and brown. Would you like a little oyster sauce, sir? There was a little cold that Mrs. Mervin sent for your dinner to-day."

"Why was it not given to me, then? Fetch it, Martha, at once. Now then, Norman, we will set to with a will. I feel quite a sinking at my chest for want of food."

Norman was hungry, and ate well; but after one small mouthful, Dr. Green toyed with his food, and then pushed his plate from him. He could not eat.

"Never mind," said Norman, encouragingly; "you shall have a pheasant to-morrow, and then we will see what you can do."

Martha cleared away, and Norman got up to leave.

"Do not go yet, my boy," pleaded the doctor. "The night is young. Only half-past ten, or so. Stay another quarter of an hour."

Norman hesitated. It was not that he did not wish to stay. He only wondered whether he might.

"I tell you what I will do, if you will allow me," he observed, after a pause. "I will stay with you all night. I can sit up and read to you, or keep in the fire, while you sleep. Please let me stay. I do not like leaving you alone. John will take word to Mrs. Duerdon."

"Tut, tut," replied the doctor, huskily; "a young, growing boy like you requires all the sleep he can get. I have plenty to stay with me when I get ill enough. On Saturday night, if I am no better, we will see. Sit down a little bit before you go. I shall be sleepy by-and-bye."

Norman complied. After all he could only get scolded, he must try and bear it for the sake of his kind friend. There was a stool at Dr. Green's feet, he pushed it nearer to Norman.

"Come and sit on that," he said, "close to me. Dear me, boy, how strangely like your mother you grow; more and more every day. I could have thought it was her face looking at me, for an instant, as the firelight flickered up. And, Norman, she was the sweetest-looking woman"—

Norman coloured, but did not speak. The doctor leant forward and gazed—Norman thought at him. But it was not. Far, far beyond: away into the distance. Norman stole a look at him at last, and was struck by the extreme gravity of his face. His thoughts seemed a long way off. After a while he spoke again.

"Ah, Norman, lad; she was a woman, if you like. One of the right sort; and I loved, her, boy.

I loved—her. But she has been gone this many a year, and you have taken her place."

"I have always understood that dear mamma was very winning," put in Norman, gently. "Did she love you, Dr. Green? Did mamma care for you"—

"I never told her, lad; it was best not. She had many lovers, and all better than me. Ah, she was a bonny, fresh, winsome girl; and, oh, how I cared for her. I have grown very fond of you, Norman, for her sake. Latterly, for your own; aye, lad, fond—very," he repeated, slowly and disconnectedly.

"And Muriel, too," put in Norman. "You care for Muriel?"

"Yes, and Muriel," assented the doctor; "my sweet little violet. Certainly Muriel, and yet not with the love I have for you, my boy. You will ever remember that, Norman. Never let people persuade you that I was not fair to you. Always remember you were dearest to me. Perhaps I have done wrong, but it was with the best motive. As you grow older you will see it."

Norman looked at Dr. Green in surprise. Was the good man wandering in his mind? Before he thought what answer he could make, the doctor continued—

"Ah, Millicent, love; I cared for them, cared for them both," he said, thickly; and he spoke slowly, as if addressing some one a long way off. "But I never did half enough, not half enough. Wait until I get myself again. Wa—it, Milli—cent."

He sank back gradually in his chair, and Norman, glancing at him, perceived he slept. His breathing was deep and irregular, and it seemed to all come through his nose. Norman was at first puzzled as to what he should do, but the minutes flew by, and he felt obliged to go. He crept out quietly on tip-toe. Martha was in the kitchen, making porridge.

"It's for master's supper," she said.

"He is sound asleep now," remarked Norman. "Mind you get him to take it before he gets to bed. I am sorry about the pheasant, I will bring him one in the morning."

"All right, Master Norman."

"And if he is not better I shall persuade him to see a physician."

Martha laughed at the idea; it quite amused her.

"Never you be afeared, Master Norman; you are over anxious about the master. He's getting well, and fast, too. I've not been with him all these years for nothing. As soon as he gets cross he begins to mend. It's always a sure sign. We shall have him about in a day or two. When them cross fits come on him—everything contrary like, then he is mending."

"Has Dr. Green ever been as ill before?" inquired Norman.

"Bless your 'eart, he's been twice as bad. This is a mild attack."

"I am glad he has been worse," responded Norman, quietly. "Very glad of that."

Muriel welcomed her brother back warmly; she had managed to stay up for him.

"It has been such a long, slow evening," she said, twining her arms through Norman's, and leaning on him.

"Yes, dear," he replied.

"Are you tired?" she asked, as he pushed back the thick, wavy hair, which clustered on his forehead.

"Very tired, Muny. How much does a pheasant cost?"

He put the question most suddenly and abruptly.

Muriel laughed softly.

"You funny boy. About 3s. 6d. to 4s. I should not have known, only I heard Mademoiselle tell Owen something about it. She seems to have taken a fancy to him, Nor; and she is bringing him on so nicely."

"Ah, is she? Owen is a dear little chap. Dr. Green was very restless and fidgety to-night, Muriel. He seems thoroughly tired of the house. I wish he would make haste and get well."

"He will soon be all right," answered Muriel, cheerfully. "Strong people, like Dr. Green, bear illness badly. It was unfortunate he was called away from the Vicarage so suddenly."

"Yes, Muriel; dreadfully unfortunate," answered Norman; but his thoughts were far away.

CHAPTER V.

MARTHA, accompanied by Sarah, who had at last returned, went into Dr. Green's room, carrying a tray with the oatmeal and a small jug of milk, shortly after Norman left. Dr. Green was still sleeping heavily. Martha, stout as she was, moved about quietly; but Sarah's step was heavier, and she was an awkward girl. In passing the bed-post her arm bumped against it. The things rattled on the tray, and Sarah spoke audibly. The voice disturbed the doctor. He looked round hastily.

"A little porridge, master?" suggested Martha, soothingly.

Dr. Green did not answer.

"Just a little bit, master?"

He looked at her then, but his hand motioned her away.

"I am sleepy," he said wearily, throwing his head back on the chair, "very sleepy. Do not disturb me. You—can—all—go—to—bed."

He evidently spoke with difficulty, and his voice was so thick that it was almost impossible to understand him.

"We'll go soon, master," assented Martha, in her cheeriest tone; "but let me give you a little

bit of supper first; it will moisten your throat. Sarah is here, and John is staying downstairs."

"What is—John—staying for? I cannot go—out—to-night," said the doctor thickly.

"No, master; he's only waiting on you."

Sarah stooped down and put some coal on the fire, which was getting low. She was a kind-hearted girl, but nervous and countrified. With all the peculiarities of a rough, uneducated girl, she dropped down every lump with a separate bang.

"Sarah, for shame!" rebuked Martha. "Have done, girl."

But Dr. Green did not say anything; he did not seem to notice it.

"Not so cross as he were," commented Martha. "I wish he'd get angry again; I'll speak. Master," she said gently, "you must take some food. I cannot go to bed and you not touched a bit worth mentioning since I do not know when. Should we stop up a bit? Could you take something a little later on?"

"No, not anything," he replied. "All go to—bed. I want—no help. . . . I am not—so weak—as you think."

He dozed off almost as he spoke, and they left the room.

A few minutes, and Martha returned. She had a large shawl in one hand, while in the other she carried a glass containing brandy-and-water.

"That will do him good, even if it is but a little drop," she said, putting it on the round table at his side. "If he don't take it until it's cold it will not matter." She threw the shawl lightly over him. "I don't believe as you were cold before, with that blanket of a dressing-gown on," she thought, "but you're safe now."

"Thank you, mother, Millicent—both," said the doctor hoarsely, jumping up suddenly.

"Lawk a-mercy, master, how you made me jump," said Martha crossly. "You were right down sudden."

Dr. Green made no answer, and Martha looked at him. He was sound asleep. She coughed, but he did not stir.

"Well, that were the funniest thing as ever were," remarked Martha to herself. "He went and caught me a-wrapping him up, and startled me near to death, and then without a word of hapology he falls off again. Ah, well, you may sleep on now for a bit; you cannot hurt. All the same you gave me a fright; that you did. John shall stay in the room next to you, and then directly you move he will come in and wait on you."

She moved away to the door, but when she got there she stopped and looked at him.

"Ah, you're fine and comfortable, sir. I'm right down glad I thought of warming that shawl for you. You cannot be cold now, can you? Good-night, master."

And Martha left him.

John refused to be put in the bedroom next his master's.

"I'm a sound sleeper, Martha," he said, "and none to be depended on. Let me lie on the rug at master's feet, and then when he moves he'll waken me."

After several objections on Martha's part she gave way.

"Sleep where you like," she said, "so as you are ready to help master into bed when he awakes."

Norman arose early the next morning. He was anxious to see after the pheasant for Dr. Green. He went first to the housekeeper's room; she was not up, but the cook told him there was not one.

"We were short of them yesterday, Master Vivian," she said; "there was some blunder in the order. The gamekeeper sent too many to the poulterer's at Jycliffe."

"To Hyde's?" questioned Norman.

"Hyde's or Bannister's; I do not remember which, sir."

Norman raced off.

"I have only a few shillings of my own," commented he. "I wonder whether Muriel can lend me anything in case I am short."

He went straight to her room. She was nearly dressed.

"Can you lend me a little silver?" he asked hurriedly. "I want it at once."

Muriel went to her purse.

"Here's a two-shilling piece. Will that do, Nor?"

"Thanks," he said, taking it. "I will explain this evening."

"You are pressed for time," laughed Muriel.

"I am, greatly. Mr. Duerdon has not given me this month's pocket money, and I cannot wait. I shall be late even as it is."

He found Sultan ready saddled and waiting for him, according to directions he had given. The pretty creature looked sideways at Norman, as if guessing something unusual was astir.

"Now, brave Sultan," said his young master, jumping on his back and patting him, "your best foot foremost."

Sultan arched his neck and pawed the ground, impatient to be off. Away they went, down the little main street, straight by Dr. Green's little house.

"The doctor's not up yet," said Norman. "His blind is not drawn."

They had gone through the village when they met John coming.

"Stop, Master Norman," he shouted.

"Not now, John. We shall be back soon."

Jycliffe was soon reached. A little delay occurred here. Norman was very particular in his

choice of a bird. It must be *the* best that money could buy. It was for the kind, good doctor, for whom nothing was too good. And when it was selected very pleased and important felt Norman. He swung it over his shoulder, and rode back proudly. He tied Sultan up at the railings, and passing through the little iron gate, knocked at the door.

Mr. Ashworth, the assistant, opened it. Norman scarcely knew him to speak to. He was a shy, retiring man, who kept out of the way as much as possible, and as latterly he had lodged away from the doctor's, and his hours were over early, the Vivians knew but little of him.

"Good-morning," said Norman, holding out his hand. "How is the doctor, Mr. Ashworth? May I go and see him? My time is necessarily limited in the mornings."

The assistant stammered something unintelligible, Norman did not catch the words, but he supposed it was a nervous acquiescence. Off he bounded joyously upstairs. Twice he knocked, but there was no answer. Norman quite waited to catch the gruff, "Who's there? Come in," but all was still.

"He is asleep," said Norman to himself. "What fun! I will steal in and put my present near him, somewhere so that his eye can rest on it directly he awakes. Will he not wonder where it has come from?"

He turned the handle of the door gently, but it would not yield to his touch. He threw the pheasant down to have both hands free when a hand was laid on his arm. It startled Norman. He turned and saw Mr. Ashworth, looking white and pale.

"You cannot go in there, Master Vivian" he said, with emotion.

Norman stared in haughty surprise.

"That is, not for a few minutes. Come downstairs; I have something to say to you," continued the assistant.

Norman stooped down and picked the dead bird up; the present that he had been so proud of seemed at a discount. He followed Mr. Ashworth downstairs, slightly wondering at the grave, troubled countenance of the man, but not a suspicion of the truth had as yet struck him. Martha stood at the foot of the stairs, her eyes swollen with crying, her apron thrown sideways over her head.

"Master Norman, you were right, you were right," she cried. "All my experience went for nothing. I was blind. He was"—

"Is Dr. Green worse?" inquired Norman hastily. "Tell me at once. Has some unfavourable symptom set in?"

Martha shook her head and cried aloud.

"Oh, I knew it! I felt it last night," said Norman, greatly moved. "Have you telegraphed for further advice now that he is worse?"

"Dr. Green is worse, much worse than you think," said Mr. Ashworth gravely. "There is no hope for him; prepare for bad news."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Norman, completely stunned, "and we stand here wasting the valuable time. Every minute may be precious; something can surely be done. Speak quickly, Mr. Ashworth; my brain has gone dull and heavy."

Mr. Ashworth shook his head.

"Poor boy; poor boy," he said.

"Master Norman," exclaimed Martha, bursting out crying afresh, "when will you understand? It's too late, too late. My master, my dear, good master, the best that servant ever served, is dead, stone-dead like that bird. He's gone to his rest."

"Dead," moaned Norman. "Oh, no, Martha, not really dead; it cannot, cannot be true. Tell me you do not mean it. I left him last night getting better—asleep, yes, asleep—and now—now you say he is dead. People do not die like that surely—so suddenly, so unexpectedly. They have to be ill in bed a long, long time first, and every one knows and does their best for them. Oh! he could not die like that without saying good-bye to any one."

And Norman covered his face in great distress.

"It is, unfortunately, too true," replied Mr. Ashworth sadly. "Sudden deaths are, unhappily, too common; his, in fact, was not so sudden as many, but it was equally unexpected. I

myself had not the slightest idea there was danger. Bronchitis or his heart must have been the cause. Either would easily account for the suddenness."

"When did he—what hour did he die?" asked Norman. "Who was with him at the last?"

"I will tell you all about it, only, Master Vivian, do not grieve so," said the assistant, with kindly sympathy. "Martha saw him after you left last night, and tried to persuade him to take food and go to bed, but he was very drowsy, and preferred the fire's warmth."

"And I threw a thick shawl, well aired, over him," sobbed Martha, "so that his poor back should be warm, and I left him to die alone—think of that, to die alone."

"Not so," corrected Mr. Ashworth; "you left John with him."

"Of what use were John?" demanded Martha, almost fiercely. "He sleeps as sound as a—a hammer and a nail."

Martha was getting confused in her grief, and recollecting the history of Sisera and Jael, lately expounded to her, thought this a happy comparison.

"I left my master all right, as I considered, last night," continued Martha. "He said he could get into bed when he wanted, and he spoke quite sharp-like. He desired no help; he worn't so weak as all that, and so, God bless him, I took him at his word, and went away never to speak to

him again—never to hear his dear voice no more in this world."

"Was John with Dr. Green when he—when he"—faltered Norman.

"When he died, Master Norman? Yes, he were there, but sound asleep. Somehow I did not feel easy all night, I cannot say why, but I felt lonesome and strange; so at six o'clock this morning, this very morning, though it seems months ago I knocked at his door. The stair clock struck whilst I stood there, knock, knock, knock. 'You are two blessed sleepers,' says I to myself. 'The doctor must be better, or he could not sleep so sound.' So with that I walks in. I'd a nice hot cup of tea, with a tempting little bit of buttered toast, all so nice, thinking to do him good, and then"—

Here Martha broke down completely. Mr. Ashworth went on.

"When Martha entered her master's room she was astonished to find him still sitting in his chair as she had left him; she could scarcely believe her eyes."

"Ah!" interrupted the faithful creature, "I darted forward, put the cup down, and stood ready to scold him. There he were, sitting with the shawl over his shoulders, and in exactly the same position; I scarcely think he had stirred."

"Where was John?" asked Mr. Ashworth, but Martha went on as if she had not heard.

"He had a small red flower tight in his hand; it is there yet."

"The one that Muriel sent," explained Norman. "Poor Dr. Green!"

"I leant forward to wake him gently," continued Martha, "and I caught sight of his face, his dear, blessed face, and when I saw that I gave a loud screech and ran downstairs."

"Singular to relate," added Mr. Ashworth, "I was entering the house at that very moment, a thing, I verily believe, I have never done at that hour during the three years and over I have helped the doctor. It so happened this morning that I wanted his advice on a particular point on which I and another surgeon disagreed. It was important for the matter to be settled quickly, so providentially, as it were, I came thus early. Alas! alas! too late for advice."

"Oh!" sobbed Norman, "it is all too sad. My dear, good friend, what shall I do? I cannot bear it."

And he laid his head down on the banister of the stairs and cried aloud. The pheasant, forgotten, lay at his feet. The revulsion of feeling from his bright hopes of the morning was too bitter. He was recovering from a violent fit of weeping when he caught sight of the bird. It set him off again, but more quietly this time. A few minutes, and he passed away from them all, out of the small passage where the doctor had so-

often welcomed him warmly, with a keener sorrow and a greater grief than he had ever before carried.

The passing bell boomed on his ear as he mounted Sultan. He shuddered, and put up his hand as if to ward away the sound.

"On, Sultan, home. No school to-day; my heart is too heavy, my head too dull. Muriel and I have lost a good friend."

Great was every one's consternation and grief when Dr. Green's death became known. He had been such a public character. People in the first shock rushed about in all directions seeking for particulars. Some declared there must be an inquest, but Mr. Shaw from Jycliffe said there was not the least need for one; he would give a certificate. He had seen Dr. Green the last day of his life, and had then considered the case hopeless, had, in fact, told the doctor so, greatly to that gentleman's anger and indignation.

"I cannot remember all the names he called me in the heat of his temper," said Mr. Shaw, in gentlemanly deprecation, "but they were numerous, and far from flattering."

"Why did you not tell the housekeeper?" asked a voice in the crowd.

"Simply because he forbade me doing so. He ended by ordering me out of the house, said he did not want a whole set of noodles about him; he knew what he was suffering from better than

a whole lot of ignoramuses could tell him; he could prescribe for himself without a pack of idiots interfering; and last of all he offended me greatly by saying he possessed more skill in his little finger than I had in my whole body. Such an accusation to bring against a fellow-practitioner," said Mr. Shaw, looking round for sympathy.

"Would that you had told me you considered him in danger," fervently aspirated Mr. Ashworth, "I would have given much to have known."

"Would that you had asked me, my dear sir," responded Mr. Shaw, earnestly. "Could I tell you did not know by intuition; it would have been insulting your medical sagacity to question your knowledge. However, it is a satisfaction to know that neither you nor the greatest skill could have saved him."

"You think he died from bronchitis?"

"I am sure he did. Years ago he told me he feared that that would be his end. The symptoms were plain enough this time, though he would not own to them. As I was leaving he made a strange speech to the effect that he was not going to have a lot of earth piled on him, though he said from the weight on his chest it might be there already. I feared any interference of mine would anger him more, and perhaps harm him. Had I met you I might perhaps have given a word of warning such as you would have understood."

"I sincerely wish you had," sighed Mr. Ashworth. "I might not, as you say, have saved him, but I would have tried my best; anyway he should not have been left to die alone. It is a wonder to me now that I could have been so blind to danger, but he always pooh-poohed me whenever I went to him, and I relied greatly on his superior judgment and knowledge, and I never recollect a fear crossing my mind."

"The housekeeper appears to have been hoodwinked in the same way. I wanted much to tell her; but Dr. Green would not hear of it. What could I do—it was not my affair."

"Well, I wish the good doctor had not died alone," persisted Mr. Ashworth.

"Dr. Green could have prevented that," replied Mr. Shaw, significantly. "His unwillingness to part with young Vivian shows me clearly that he realized the danger himself; death must have come painlessly; he passed off in his sleep without a struggle, I should say—a peaceful ending for such a turbulent character."

"You think so honestly?"

"I do; had he wakened up he would have disturbed John, and the man in great distress told me he was sure master had never stirred."

Further discussion was useless. Mr. Ashworth walked away. Mr. Shaw's conduct was censured on every side. He was stigmatized as heartless and cruel. He certainly had shown a callous in-

difference, a cold neglect, and those to whom the doctor had been dear resented it warmly. What mattered it, said they, that Dr. Green had been brusque and blunt, it was only a fault of manner, a blind to hide the unusually warm heart beating within. Could not Mr. Shaw have borne it without resentment at such a time? They could, they understood his worth too well. It was too late for vain regrets, none could bring him back, neither could they smooth his passage across the dark, black river. He had crossed it in the dead of night—some hours after midnight it was presumed—untended, alone.

CHAPTER VI.

Late on in the afternoon of the next day, two days after the doctor's death, when dusk was brooding o'er the earth, Norman and Muriel went to take their last earthly look at the friend who had been so kind to them. They were both very distressed. Norman the most so outwardly. He went up and kissed the cold face reverently, and parted the hair back from off the rugged brow.

"How pleased he was once, Muny, when I kissed him," he said, sorrowfully. "How pleased and how proud."

Muriel did not answer; perhaps she could not. She placed a few hothouse flowers, which she had begged from the gardener, on his breast, and gently stroked away a few hairs that Norman had let fall on the forehead.

"Cold and icy," she said, shivering. "Oh, Norman, let us go."

One long, wistful look they both gave, then left the room.

The doctor's funeral was one of the largest that had ever taken place in Astley. Quite a public affair; every one desired to render honour to his memory. Without one relative to mourn his loss, without wife or child, mother or sister to grieve

over his sad and sudden departure, his might have been an instance, of which it is said there is not one, of a body buried without a tear being shed. But not so, grief loud and expressed, silent and subdued, open and demonstrative, were there. Mr. Duerdon had had a most beautiful cross and wreath of white hothouse flowers made and placed on the coffin. They were admired by all, both for beauty and design.

As Norman was leaving the grave a strange and gentlemanly-looking man went up and addressed him, requesting his and his sister's presence at the residence of the late Dr. Green.

"What can they want us for?" inquired Muriel, startled.

"I cannot imagine," answered Norman, equally puzzled, "unless it is to tell us that Sultan is to be sold with the doctor's goods and effects."

"Nonsense," said Muriel, smiling, "they will never do that. The pony is yours to keep as long as you like, as much as if you had bought it."

But on reaching the house they found they had been called to listen to the reading of the will. The lawyer, Mr. Mervin, Norman and Muriel, Martha and John, Sarah, and, strange to say, Mr. Ashworth, were all present. The lawyer read aloud for some time, and though the terms of the will were extremely simple and untechnical, drawn out by the doctor himself, it was some time before it struck Norman what all the business was about,

and at last he caught his own name, "my dear young friend, Norman Vivian," and it then occurred to him that they were listening to the will. We cannot presume to enter into the technicalities of the law any more than Dr. Green did; suffice it to say that he died possessed of considerable property, to the astonishment of every one; and Muriel, with the few exceptions was the sole inheritress. The sale of the house, garden, horses, traps, practice and furniture, and all belonging to any of these said things was to be speedily effected, and the proceeds of them to be given to Norman. Martha and John had each one hundred pounds left to them for their long and faithful services; twenty-five pounds to Sarah, and three hundred to Mr. Ashworth, as a token of esteem, and as a small help towards purchasing a practice for himself, all free of legacy duty; and the rest without reservation, over nine thousand pounds, was to be given to Muriel for her sole and exclusive use. Mr. Mervin was to be trustee until she came of age. The Vivians wondered at this.

"Do you know why Dr. Green appointed me trustee?" inquired the Vicar, as if divining their thoughts, peering at Muriel over his spectacles.

"No," she replied, "I cannot guess." She was feeling deeply hurt that the money had not been equally divided between herself and Norman. Rather would she have been forgotten altogether than placed before him.

"I will tell you then," said Mr. Mervin. "Dr. Green had such a high opinion of your sense and judgment that he made me sole trustee on condition that I always let you do as you wished, never combated any plans you might form or any wish you expressed."

"Why then, did not Dr. Green leave it to me without trustees?"

"You may well ask that," answered the Vicar, mildly, "the very question I asked myself. Money cannot be so left. You are under age—an infant in law, and in case no trustee had been appointed Mr. Duerdon would at present have had the control over it."

"Perhaps Mr. Duerdon will be hurt at the present arrangement?" suggested Muriel, timidly.

"Not a bit. Duerdon is a good fellow. He made no objection," said Mr. Mervin. "Dr. Green was obliged to consult him. Mr. Duerdon is in fact one of the witnesses to the will. Did you hear the lawyer read that you were to come of age at eighteen?"

"No," responded Muriel, indifferently. Suddenly her manner changed—

"Can I then make a will and leave it to any one?" she asked, "or give it up at once if I like?"

"Most certainly," answered the Vicar, "you will be whole and sole mistress, and may do as you like."

"Oh, I am glad. I shall give it all to Norman directly I am eighteen. It ought to have been left to him, not to me, if either of us were to have it. I do not care for money, at least not for much," she added, truthfully.

"You will be doing very wrong," remarked Mr. Mervin, "and in direct opposition to Dr. Green's wishes. Had he thought it right to leave Norman the money he would have done so, for he loved your brother right well. He had a wise motive in providing for you. I scarcely think you will act contrary to his expressed desire."

At this juncture Norman came up, his face beaming with pleasure—

"Muriel," he said, taking her hands and kissing her warmly, "I am so glad, dear; let me be the first to congratulate you. How good of the kind doctor. He appreciated you, pet."

There was no selfish regret, no jealous repining at being unjustly dealt with; no covetousness, only pleasure and delight at his sister's good fortune.

"How now, Norman," said Mr. Mervin, willing to sound the boy scrutinizingly, "do you not feel cross at being left out in the cold?"

"What way?" asked Norman, astonished.

"At your sister being made an heiress, whilst you only come in for a small sum. It was not quite just."

"Mr. Mervin," said Norman, hotly, "you do

not see things in their right light. I always loved Dr. Green, and now I honour and respect him for his wise decision. He could not have done better. He has indeed proved himself a kind friend, and I thank him from my heart."

"Well, he might have divided the money equally, Norman."

"I am very glad he did not. It shows he understood me well. A boy endowed with energies and abilities can make his way anywhere, as I am bound to do. I am glad I am not fettered down with money, and girls cannot do without it. I feel so much obliged to the dear doctor that I can scarcely find words in which to thank him."

"You are right, Norman," said Mr. Mervin, gazing with pleasure at the noble, flushed face of the boy. "I perfectly agree with you, and only said what I did to try you."

"I am sorry you should have questioned my behaviour," said Norman, proudly. "Dr. Green did not."

"He never did—though in much doubt and difficulty himself as to the justice of his will, he always said, 'Norman will know, Norman will see I was right.'

"Dear, good doctor," said Norman, with fervour.

There was one person who felt extremely indignant at Muriel's good fortune, and that was Mrs. Duerdon. She was annoyed and angered at the doctor's foresight and prudence. Had he left

Mr. Duerdon trustee she would not have minded so much, for she would then have been virtually trustee, and Muriel could, at any rate for a time, have benefited but little by her money. Now Muriel had escaped from under her thumb. Weak Mr. Mervin would let her have whatever she wanted. But in spite of her railing there was nothing she could do, and she had to satisfy herself by venting unkind speeches at odd times, when opportunity presented itself—such as "She will want it with her plain looks. Poor portionless girl, she has got something at last. All the money in the world would not get Muriel Vivian a husband," and so on. But these speeches never upset Muriel's equanimity. She did not care so long as the doctor's name was not traduced, and this Mrs. Duerdon never did. Mrs. Duerdon could not raise the girl's anger now. She had found herself powerless since that final outburst before they went to the seaside.

Martha's grief for Dr. Green's death was short-lived. Other things combined to make her forget it. She thought one time of taking a cottage with her hundred pounds and becoming a laundress. She wanted no missus, she emphatically declared, and nowhere could she find a master like Dr. Green.

"Happen you might, Martha," suggested John, slily.

"Never, John, don't you go for to insinivate sueh cruelty."

"Should I do, Martha?"

"You?" said Martha, looking at him in amazement. "Are you in your senses, John?"

"Aye, Martha, I am just right. You'd make a good wife for me. Will't 'ee have me, Martha?"

"Well, I never did," remarked the honest woman. "I don't know as it would be so bad."

And so it was finally arranged. The only difficulty that Martha saw to the whole affair was whether she could forgive John for sleeping on so soundly by the side of his dead master.

"Well, Martha, lass, I couldna' help it," was his penitent cry. "You'd a-slept yourself if there was no sound to disturb you."

And Martha forgave him, and they were married.

Sarah went to Astley Park as schoolroom maid, the other servant having left to better herself. A nice cheerful, willing acquisition she proved; invaluable in good temper to Owen, and a sturdy friend to Norman and Muriel. She became less awkward under Spence's staid, quiet rule; and remained all her life a faithful servant and friend to Muriel. Norman's unselfish nature and goodness of heart displayed itself greatly in the matter of the disposal of Dr. Green's practice. With his natural thoughtfulness for the good of others, it grieved him that Mr. Ashworth was not rich enough to become purchaser, and Norman began to wonder if he could not help him in any way;

he had been so pleased with the quiet, unobtrusive medical man. The result was a personal application to Mr. Duerdon.

"Could he not pay me something down now, Uncle Fred, and leave the rest for a year or two? I should like to help him."

"You must consult Mr. Mervin, Norman; he is trustee in the affair," replied Mr. Duerdon somewhat coldly.

Try as he would, Mr. Duerdon could not help resenting Dr. Green's clear-sightedness. He had been consulted in every way, and signified his consent; he could scarcely do otherwise under the circumstances. He knew Dr. Green had had a high opinion of him alone, but that he preferred some one who could act unbiased, or if fettered, it must be by advice from some one likely to better the Vivians' cause. And so, though he owned the justice, he felt piqued. Mr. Duerdon was governed completely by his wife; he was not a free agent, and he knew it. None the less bitter did the yoke become because others saw it and recognised it also.

"I know, Uncle Fred, that I must appeal to Mr. Mervin finally," said Norman, "but I want your advice on the subject."

"Do as you like."

"That is no answer," persisted the boy. "Do not be angry, Uncle Fred, but tell me"—

"Well, my boy," answered Mr. Duerdon, pleased

at Norman's pertinacity, "I think you may help Mr. Ashworth. I shall always provide well for you. Do just what you think best."

"You are very good, Uncle Fred," replied Norman gratefully. "I may well be anxious to help others; it costs me so little."

And Norman went to Mr. Mervin full of his scheme.

The Vicar was very pleased to see him, listened quietly to his case, and interested himself as much as if it had been Ernest who was in a dilemma. "Attended to me as if I had been a grown-up gentleman," Norman declared later on. But Mr. Mervin did not encourage Norman in his scheme.

"Dr. Green did not, I believe, wish for such an arrangement," he said, in explanation. "He thought Ashworth better suited for a town practice, or he would have left this to him conditionally."

"Did he really say so?" queried Norman in disappointment.

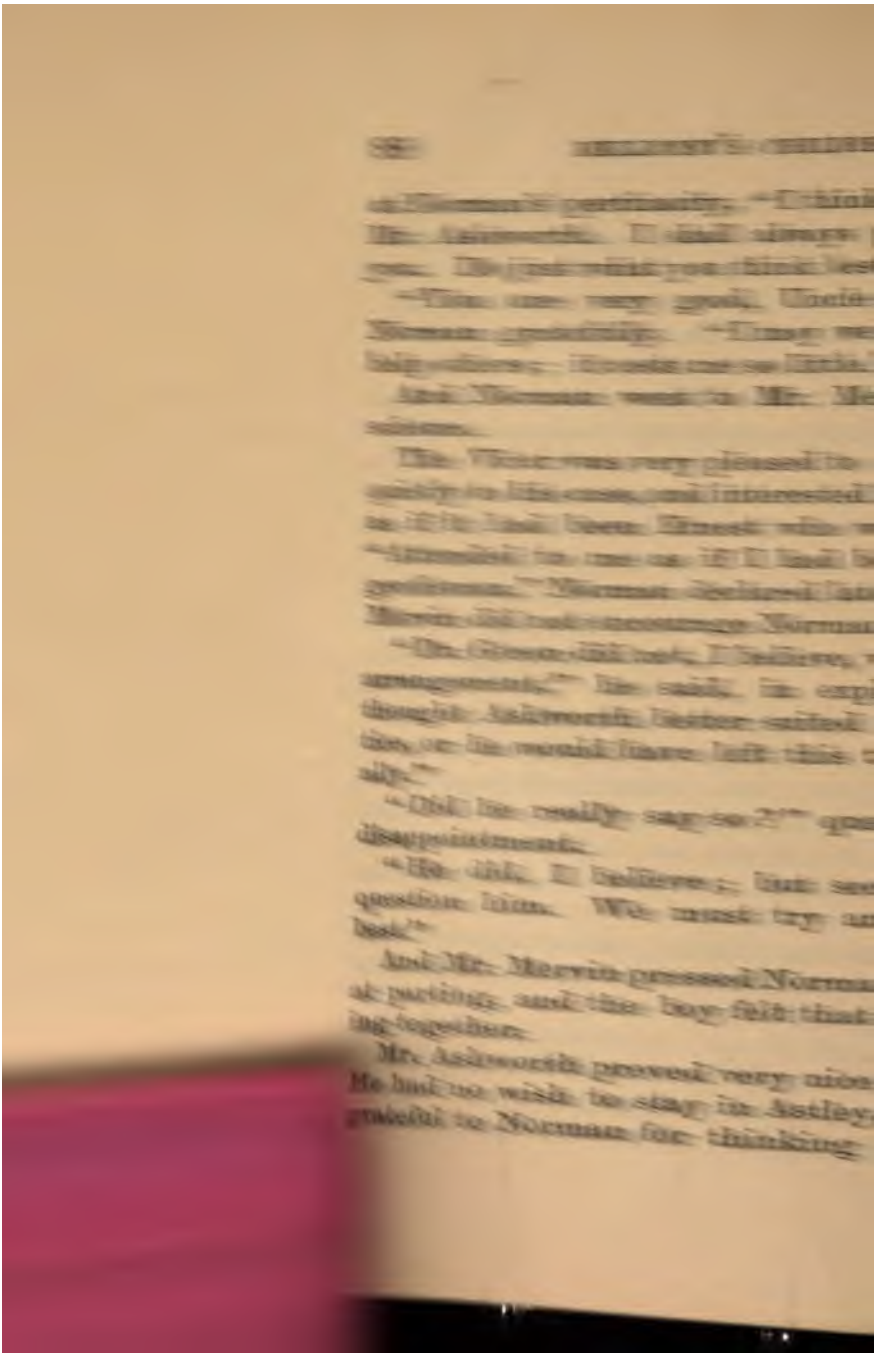
"He did, I believe; but see Ashworth and question him. We must try and do all for the best."

And Mr. Mervin pressed Norman's hand warmly at parting, and the boy felt that they were working together.

Mr. Ashworth proved very nice when spoken to. He had no wish to stay in Astley, though he felt grateful to Norman for thinking of him, and for

wishing to make the purchasing terms easy. Dr. Green had once, and only once, mentioned the subject to him; and they had both agreed that a country practice required a stronger man. Mr. Ashworth had saved five hundred pounds, and that, joined to the doctor's legacy, would enable him to buy something suitable. So Astley was in the market, but not for long; it was too good and extensive a practice. A Mr. Adolphus S. Belgrave, F.R.C.S.L.E., and nobody knows how many more letters at the end of his name, came from London, rode round the country, visited at a few of the better patients' houses, looked at the books, and purchased Dr. Green's goodwill for the sum of fifteen hundred pounds. Whether this was too much or not Norman had not the least idea; to him it seemed an enormous sum. Mr. Belgrave gave it willingly. And when the house and furniture, horses and traps, &c., were sold, there was, when everything was paid, twelve hundred and fifty-eight pounds sixteen shillings and fourpence-halfpenny more to be added to Norman's account. So after all he was not left penniless. He felt pleased that he would have enough, with the help of the Jycliffe exhibition, to go to college without entrenching on Mr. Duerdon's purse.

It soon became generally known that Dr. Green had died possessed of property. These things do get found out even when it is desirable to hide them from the public gaze; nobody knows how.



wishing to make the purchasing terms easy. Dr. Green had once, and only once, mentioned the subject to him; and they had both agreed that a country practice required a stronger man. Mr. Ashworth had saved five hundred pounds, and that, joined to the doctor's legacy, would enable him to buy something suitable. So Astley was in the market, but not for long; it was too good and extensive a practice. A Mr. Adolphus S. Belgrave, F.R.C.S.L.E., and nobody knows how many more letters at the end of his name, came from London, rode round the country, visited at a few of the better patients' houses, looked at the books, and purchased Dr. Green's goodwill for the sum of fifteen hundred pounds. Whether this was too much or not Norman had not the least idea; to him it seemed an enormous sum. Mr. Belgrave gave it willingly. And when the house and furniture, horses and traps, &c., were sold, there was, when everything was paid, twelve hundred and fifty-eight pounds sixteen shillings and fourpence-halfpenny more to be added to Norman's account. So after all he was not left penniless. He felt pleased that he would have enough, with the help of the Jycliffe exhibition, to go to college without entrenching on Mr. Duerdon's purse.

It soon became generally known that Dr. Green had died possessed of property. These things do get found out even when it is desirable to hide them from the public gaze; nobody knows how.

But in this case it did not matter. Surprise was universal. Dr. Green had always passed for a poor man, comparatively poor that is. No one had had any idea that he was saving money; all supposed he lived up to his income. No one was more astonished at the announcement than was kind hearted, motherly Mrs. Mervin.

"To think that he should have taken us in so," she sighed. "I feel quite upset."

"Who has been taking us in, my dear?" asked Mr. Mervin, suddenly startled out of some abstruse subject he had been studying.

"Dr. Green, George."

Mrs. Mervin had been visiting in the village dispensing kindness and distributing charity, as was her wont. She came home laden with a budget of news, with which, as usual, she hurried into her husband's study, slightly to the detriment of any doctrinal difficulty.

"What has Dr. Green surprised you about, Fanny?" asked the Vicar, taking up his pipe and filling it.

"Have you not heard all I have been saying, George," said Mrs. Mervin, not well pleased. "I was talking about money and"—

"The fact was, my dear, I was deep in study when you came in; and it required a few seconds to recall my scattered senses. Pardon me, Fanny, I am all attention."

Mrs. Mervin, thoroughly mollified, continued—

"Our dear old doctor, George, has left ever so many thousands. Just imagine, when we never knew that he had so many pence."

"I knew it, my dear," put in the Vicar mildly.

"You did! and you never told me, George!" said Mrs. Mervin reproachfully.

"Would it have interested you, Fanny?"

"Of course it would, and relieved me too. I always felt so sorry for him, working day and night hard like a horse."

"Do horses work day and night? I was not aware of it," asked the Vicar slily.

"Now, George, you are laughing at me; you know what I mean. Look at his clothes, too."

"His clothes!" repeated Mr. Mervin in amazement; "what was the matter with them?"

"What a question! Just as if you had never noticed. Why, they were shabby to a degree."

Mr. Mervin looked surprised.

"Well," corrected the lady, "if they were not shabby they were never grand."

"There is a great difference in that. Perhaps our good friend was lucky enough to hit the happy medium."

"Not he. Why, George, they would have been considered shabby on any one else."

"I never thought so," puffed Mr. Mervin; "they were good enough."

"Think of his house, too; small, and badly furnished, right in the middle of a street, subject

to traffic and annoyance. Who would have thought he would have lived in such a place?"

"Just the place for a doctor, Fanny; a central position, accessible to all. No other house in the village would have been half as convenient."

"I always thought he stayed there for want of means."

"That is a mistake people are apt to make," remarked Mr. Mervin sagely. "Had Dr. Green lived in a larger house, at a more extravagant rate, he could not have left so much."

"True; still, George, I am very surprised that Dr. Green left any money behind him. I so often pitied him for his want of means, that the idea has strengthened with my growth."

"I hope, Fanny, you never suggested such an idea to the doctor?"

Mrs. Mervin paused to think.

"I do not recollect doing so," she said; "and even if I did he would not mind."

"No, he was a good man," rejoined Mr. Mervin warmly; "a simple-living, kindly man. He had no expensive habits; he neither smoked nor drank. As a rule, there was nothing he liked better than his basin of porridge."

"And I believe he was hospitable," put in Mrs. Mervin.

"Exceedingly so when he could do good. Witness the Vivians, how hospitably he treated them. For many years past his practice has been

a large and lucrative one. Had he not lately suffered losses, he would have left much more than he has done."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Mervin, "you do astonish me! Some one must have left him some —a wealthy relation, perhaps."

"He had no wealthy relatives. He was the only son of his mother, and she a widow, like the one in the Bible."

"Quite a little romance," said Mrs. Mervin, getting interested in the story; "some grand lady, I daresay, who left her rich friends in anger to marry the man she loved. I always thought the doctor must be well descended, he carried himself *de haut ton*. I hope I have expressed myself correctly; my French is deficient after so many years."

Mr. Mervin smiled; he was not able to help her.

"You are doubtless right, my dear Fanny, in the foreign language," replied her husband politely; "but I am sorry to dispel your little illusion concerning the doctor's grand birth. Far from being what is called well born, he was the son of a small shoemaker, who died and left him quite a baby."

"How dreadful! how shocking!" gasped Mrs. Mervin.

"Yes dear; we value good birth, but we must not let our instinct be blinded in this instance. We must freely accord Dr. Green with great praise. He

rode over the disadvantages of lowly origin, and shone as a gentleman. His mother was a plain, hard-working woman, who worked incessantly to bring him up well. She gave him a good education, and great credit is due to her."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Mervin quietly. "I fear my prejudices are strong. I would rather Dr. Green's parents had been somebodies; I do not like my grand castles in the air being destroyed."

"There are always exceptions to rules," said Mr. Mervin warmly. "There have been, and there always will be, men who rise superior to birth. Honour people for other things as well—intellect, patience, indomitable perseverance and so on, and then you will not be far wrong."

"How did you find out about Dr. Green's parentage," inquired Mrs. Mervin presently.

"I heard it from his own lips less than a year ago, when he made his will."

"So recently as that. Do you think he had any prevision of his death, George?"

"That I cannot say. No, I should think not; how could he?"

"I judged so by his leaving Mr. Ashworth money; a man who could leave him at any time."

"Yes; and the doctor could alter his will at any time. He drew it up himself; Duerdon and I were the witnesses, also Blake, the lawyer."

"Oh, it was legal then," sighed Mrs. Mervin.

"Perfectly so, I should imagine. Any way, there is no one to dispute it."

"Norman might."

"Norman!" echoed Mr. Mervin.

"Yes, Norman. How could Dr. Green be so unjust as to leave that bright, gracious boy nearly penniless. Boys require more money than girls. I would never have believed he could have been so unfair."

"Norman will have nearly two thousand."

"Yes, and Muriel over nine. Do you call that fair treatment?"

"Perfectly, Fanny! I think you are failing in allegiance to the good doctor's memory. He would be grieved, so earnestly did he strive to leave all in the best way for 'Millicent's children.' There, my dear, is a romance if you like, such as one reads of: a love that lasted all his life, though he never won the object of it."

"Aye," responded Mrs. Mervin gently; "you have told me of that before. Can you not explain why loving Millicent's children for her sake he did not leave them both alike?"

"Easily; for he often talked it over with me in great anxiety. It was done in no spirit of preference, that's certain; for I verily believe he liked Norman far better of the two. But his judgment was clear and penetrating; he saw farther than we do. The very fact of Norman's superior power of winning friends, his good talents, pleasing manners, and the chance he will have of making his way in the world, which chance the doctor himself had made so much of, all influenced

his decision. Muriel, so different and shy, so retiring and difficult to understand, with no prospect of improving her position, he thought—and wisely to my mind—stood more in need of help. I really think, as you a short while ago, suggested, that Dr. Green may have felt a prevision of his death, so wisely has he left all for the present time."

"Nevertheless," sighed Mrs. Mervin, "I feel sorry for Norman. A young man needs money to start him in life."

"True, Fanny, but he will have enough, and if he should want more, Muriel, who loves him better than aught else in the world, has absolute power to help him. The doctor foresaw this contingency arising; had Norman owned too much it might have rendered him, as it does many others, indolent and careless, whereas he now has every incentive to work."

"It would not have spoilt Norman," spoke up Mrs. Mervin, staunchly.

"As far as I can see," went on Mr. Mervin, unheeding the interruption, "Dr. Green's will will answer; if it does not, I shall be sorry, for he, as I before said, did all for the best, even with the fear of his motive being misunderstood. Fanny, I am surprised that you of all people should doubt the doctor."

"Oh, George, I do not question his motive; I only think he erred in judgment. It is so sad about Norman. Perhaps after all he will dispute the will."

"There is no chance of that. Norman is perfectly satisfied, more than satisfied, delighted, at the arrangements, and applauds the doctor immensely."

Mrs. Mervin drew a deep sigh.

"Well, dear lad, if he is pleased, there is no reason why I should not be satisfied; and yet, George, I wish our old friend had divided it equally. It seems somehow as if Norman had been slighted, and he is too good for such treatment. I wish I had known sooner; I would have tried to make Dr. Green alter his purpose."

"Perhaps that is what the doctor dreaded," said Mr. Mervin, significantly. "He reiterated over and over again, 'Be sure you do not tell your wife, Mervin.'"

"Aye, then he feared a woman's tongue," laughed Mrs. Mervin.

Three weeks after the doctor's death, just before November went out, a confirmation was held in the small church at Astley. It was a grand event, the visit of a real live bishop in that small, out-of-the-way, and to a certain extent unimportant place. Dr. Bee, the bishop of the diocese, wished, if possible, to visit every parish, large or small, over which his jurisdiction extended, and Astley in its turn came among the smaller churches. Norman and Ernest Mervin and Muriel were all to be confirmed. Muriel, in virtue of her position, was placed at the head of the girls, a shy girl

robed in white, with her long veil falling all round her. Ernest Mervin led off the boys. This was Mr. Mervin's arrangement, but it did not please Ernest, for though older than Norman, he was behind him at school. He whispered a few words to Norman, and they changed places; but this diplomacy did not effect much, for by some carelessness of Norman's, or else in his hurry, he had forgotten to fully equip himself, and had gone without a pocket handkerchief. Not liking to make a stir, yet thinking if he made haste he would be back before the procession started, he slipped quietly away and ran home; but on his return, panting and breathless, he found the candidates gone. The service was proceeding, and with his reverence for holy things, and in all strict observance thereof, also with a deep humility which was a touching trait of his character, he only advanced a short way down the aisle, and sat in a pew there behind and apart from the rest. He preferred doing that to disturbing the congregation by taking his proper place. When it came to the boys' turn to advance to the Bishop, Ernest paused, expecting Norman to come up and take the lead, but he was kneeling, his head buried in his hands, and did not observe the hesitation, so Ernest went first. As the last row of boys took their places the congregation was startled by seeing a boy come from the bottom of the church, and that boy no less a personage than Norman Vivian. Mrs.

Duerdon gazed in displeased wonderment. The rail was nearly full; there was only just room for one. Thus it happened that Norman was the last confirmed. The Bishop, a keen observer, looked long and scrutinizingly at the earnest face of the gentlemanly youth, who contrasted strongly with the village lads, nice healthy, clean lads, but not in any way to be compared to Norman. Norman noticed the searching gaze, and with heightened colour knelt to receive his lordship's blessing. Very slowly and solemnly was it pronounced, and his hand in full weight dwelt for a full minute tenderly on the boy's head as if he indeed prayed that great blessings might be poured on the youthful suppliant. Lingeringly he rolled out those three last words "Thine everlasting kingdom." Norman never forgot the way he pronounced them, or the text of his address later on, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever." They made a great impression on him. He told Muriel in confidence that he should for the future make that his standing text.

Norman grew graver about this time. The shock of the doctor's death and the importance of taking such solemn vows on himself made him more thoughtful and earnest, not less lovable and winning; oh, no, never that, gentle Norman.

CHAPTER VII.

At the commencement of the Christmas holidays Norman still held his place as head boy in the school, and at the following Easter he would carry away the exhibition for which he had so long and so energetically striven. He would only be seventeen then, a year too young by the laws of the school to be sent to college. Norman often wondered what Mr. Duerdon would do in the matter, whether he would send him for a year to a large public school, or whether he would engage a tutor for him at home, but so far it had not troubled him much. He was glad of a few weeks' rest, a time of uninterrupted enjoyment of Muriel's society, for he felt unnerved and done up by all he had recently undergone.

The holidays sped quickly and quietly with one or two exceptions. The Duerdons gave two large parties at Astley Park, and the Mervins followed with one at the Vicarage, and everything passed off, as Muriel declared, as if Dr. Green was quite forgotten. On Twelfth Night a large party was given at Sedgeby Hall to a great number of juveniles. The Vivians and Ernest Mervin received invitations. Muriel looked wonderfully nice in a soft

white merino simply trimmed with black ribbons and sash. Mademoiselle, who never went away for any holidays, superintended the style and arrangement of the dress, and it was as the French so often make things, perfect and becoming. Muriel had one of those faces which light up well, and the extreme simplicity and taste of her dress, which would have been trying to a prettier face, suited her famously. In her luxuriant dark hair was a white Christmas rose studded round with fern leaves, a present from Norman out of the hothouse. Norman felt quite proud of his sister, a not altogether novel feature in his character, though perhaps he displayed his feelings more openly when he saw her looking so nice in evening costume. Mr. Duerdon accompanied them. Mrs. Duerdon was to have gone, but she was taken with a violent headache just before starting, and had to rest instead. Norman, who did not feel well, had offered to stay at home and read to her, but she declined his offer, merely saying she preferred being alone, so he contented himself by putting a few drops of eau-de-cologne on her forehead and gently blowing them. He knew what a nice cure this was for a headache; Muriel often did it for him.

"Thank you, Norman; you are a good nurse," remarked Mrs. Duerdon, graciously. "Send to Ernest Mervin, and offer him my seat in the carriage."

This was unwonted thought on Mrs. Duerdon's part.

"Just the thing, Mrs. Duerdon," said Norman, with pleasure. "How nice of you to think of it. Ernest was going on his pony. Mr. and Mrs. Mervin declined their invitation. I will send at once."

When Norman returned from sending the message he stood by the fireplace waiting. Mrs. Duerdon looked at him.

"I wonder, Norman," she asked, at length, "what there is in you which compels every one to like you?"

Norman looked up surprised.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Duerdon," he said, "you are speaking ironically."

She made no reply.

Presently she said, "Norman, do you not feel well?"

"I have a slight headache," he answered, lightly; "nothing unusual."

"Try some eau-de-cologne," said Mrs. Duerdon.

There was something so unusual in this kindness of Mrs. Duerdon's, such a new interest and attention, that Norman could not do otherwise than accept it, though he had perfectly doused his forehead with some of it out of a bottle of Muriel's before he came downstairs. He took out his handkerchief and sprinkled it, and the carriage was announced.

"Mind you take care of yourself, Clara," said Mr. Duerdon, coming in the room and drawing on one of his gloves.

"I shall be all right," replied Mrs. Duerdon, all her good humour vanished. "Do not keep the carriage waiting, and take care that Muriel does nothing outré or absurd."

Muriel and Ernest were seated in the carriage, so the last remark did not affect her, and a happy, if not a lively, party drove from Astley. The only slight hitch that occurred was occasioned by Norman; he sat with his back to the horses, and it made him feel sick. Muriel changed places with him, and Mr. Duerdon opened one window a little. He laughed, however, and said—"Norman, I am afraid you are fanciful; sitting that way never affects me."

"Yes, it does seem foolish," answered the boy, "but I never can manage for long. Perhaps I shall grow out of it."

He looked still pale when they entered the large ball-room at Sedgeby Hall, but his colour came back, and he got brighter as the evening proceeded. He could not be prevailed on to dance. Some one in the room twitted him, and said—"You will not dance on account of Dr. Green's death; I wonder you could be prevailed on to come at all."

"You are wrong, Hurst," replied Norman. "I should have no scruple on that point. Dr. Green

was the very last person to demand such strange respect. He would have wished us both to enjoy ourselves to the best of our ability. Muriel and I both know we are honouring his memory best by striving to crush all useless grief."

"Why not dance, then?"

"Simply because I do not feel equal to it."

Some time after this, and before supper, Norman walked into a pretty conservatory at one end of the long room. Fountains in marble basins were playing all round, sending out refreshing drops sparkling like diamonds. Their cooling properties cooled him, as they did the lovely-hued flowers and leaves on which they fell. Music from the band was wafted in, and Norman felt happy, happier than he had done since his arrival. Turning a corner, he most unexpectedly came upon Muriel talking to Ernest. They welcomed him eagerly, and Muriel made room for him to sit near her.

"I was wondering where you were, Muny," observed Norman. "I thought you were being whirled about by one of your numerous admirers. I would have joined you sooner had I known you were here."

"I have only just come. I was scolding Ernest for not dancing. Was I not, Ernest?"

"That you were, but where is the use; I never learned dancing, not the round dances."

"Well, dance quadrilles, lancers, and Caledonians; that is all I ask."

"Leave Ernest to me, Muriel; we shall be company together. My head aches too badly for me to dance."

"Poor Nor," murmured Muriel, gently. "I wish I had some eau-de-cologne."

"I have any amount," answered Norman, lightly. "Madam was very kind, and gave me some before I came."

"What do you think of all these doings?" inquired Ernest. "Do you not find them tiring? I for one am glad we are not generally considered old enough to come to these sort of parties."

"I do not know that I altogether agree with you, Ernest," was Norman's reply. "We get a glimpse into fairy-land on these occasions, and as we have not the honour to be fairies, we should be duly grateful. Muriel, what do you fancy I"—

Voices in eager conversation were heard approaching, and Norman lowered his tone, not wishing to disturb any one. It was unfortunate he did so, for his voice became drowned, and catching the name of Vivian, they all three unconsciously gave their attention, too rapt to notice what they were doing.

"And where do these Vivians come from?" was the first question that fell on their ears.

"From Astley Park, a large mansion and place belonging to Mr. Duerdon."

"But you said their name was Vivian, did you not? Did I mistake, are they Duerdons?"

"You are right, they are called Vivians. Orphans, adopted by Mr. Duerdon; the children of a half-sister, or something like that."

"Oh, mere nobodies, then. I thought from their appearance they were some one grand. Let us stand here, just by these flowers."

"You are quite mistaken, their position is a very good one; they have money, and are much sought after."

"But what a difference in their looks, who would take them for brother and sister? He so handsome and aristocratic, she so plain and awkward."

"Miss Sinclair, I shall think you jealous," was the laughing reply. "Take care, Miss Vivian is the most perfect young lady in the room."

"You are joking, Mr. Murray."

"Never was farther from it. Have you yet spoken to Miss Vivian?"

"No, I have not been introduced to her."

"Wait until you have, and pass sentence, then you will be surprised at the change. She has one of the most expressive faces, and the sweetest smile. Her teeth, too, are very even; and her voice—her voice is marvellously clear and sweet. I never heard anything like it."

"I am afraid, Mr. Murray, you are not an impartial judge. I should call Miss Vivian the plainest girl in the room."

"Wait," was the laughing reply. "You will

say differently by-and-bye. And after all it is scarcely fair to compare Muriel with Norman Vivian, he is so greatly gifted, both in mind and person. A universal favourite at school, a "—

"Oh," said Norman, jumping up, "I can stand this no longer; are they never going to reach us?"

Muriel glanced at him, his face was white as death; he stood pale and trembling.

"Never mind their remarks, Norman," pleaded Muriel, standing up, too. "We ought not to have listened."

"No, neither ought they to be talking over people's merits and demerits in that way. Go and stop them, Muriel."

For one instant Muriel hesitated, she was shy, and the position was awkward. But her love for Norman conquered. She turned the corner quickly, and with a dignity that few might have expected from her, said—

"Mr. Murray, you were not aware that Norman and I are sitting round the corner. We could not help hearing you."

Alan Murray—for he it was, and the Vivians had known his voice from the very commencement, seemed quite bewildered. Muriel had scarcely got back to Norman before Alan was by her side.

"I am so sorry," he said, "what can I"—

"You can say nothing, do nothing," replied Norman, with hauteur. "Alan, I am surprised at you criticising my sister in that—that—"

A pause. Norman got up, staggered, and would have fallen had not Ernest caught him in his arms. At this juncture Alan's companion, a very plain, ordinary-looking girl, joined them. She was very fancifully, and far too much dressed. Muriel felt a dislike to her in one short glimpse.

"Norman has fainted," exclaimed Alan, hurriedly. "Oh, what have we done? Muriel, run; stay, you don't know the way. Miss Sinclair, please hasten for a glass of wine or brandy, as quickly as you can."

She ran off, and Alan, stooping down, got a little water from the fountain nearest to him, which he sprinkled over Norman's face. He came round at once, before Miss Sinclair returned, and she was gone an incredibly short space of time. Norman declined the wine, saying he never took it; so the young lady went for a tumbler of water, and that he drank off. Alan whispered to him.

"No, you are mistaken, Alan; it was not that. No, you need not apologise; though you should have been careful. It was the smell of the flowers that affected me, the faint and, to me, sickly odour. Did not any one else notice it?"

They all shook their heads. Muriel turned to Alan.

"I did not know you were here to-night, Mr. Murray," she said. "I almost thought when I heard you speak that my ears were playing me false."

Muriel generally called Alan by his Christian name, he noticed the difference at once.

"I arrived late, Muriel; and I begin to think, perhaps, it would have been as well had I not come at all. Miss Sinclair and I ought, nay must, both apologise."

But on looking round they found Miss Sinclair had disappeared.

"Do not be very angry with us, Muriel," continued Alan, penitently. "I am very sorry. I did not guess you were so near."

"There is nothing to be sorry about," answered Muriel, simply. "You said what you thought, and how nicely you spoke of Norman. Thank you very much for doing so."

Alan's face flushed crimson. True he had spoken well of Norman, but how about the way he had compared them. It had not been altogether satisfactory, but he did not say any more, only offered his arm to Muriel, and she took it.

"Norman, dear boy, we will not be away long. Ernest, will you take care of him, whilst I and Miss Vivian have a little chat?"

Norman was lying full length on the seat; Ernest stood by his side. They both nodded, and Norman smiled faintly; his eyes watched both Alan and Muriel as they walked away.

"Muriel," said Alan, after a short conversation, "I do not like recurring to unpleasant subjects, but I must tell you again how sorry I am that I

forgot my manners in the way I did. You are too great a friend of mine for me to wound your feelings. It was a great presumption for me to be discussing you publicly with a stranger like the horrid Miss Sinclair. Low be it spoken, for walls have ears; say you grant a full and free forgiveness."

"Oh, Alan, do not allude to our unfortunate contretemps again," pleaded Muriel earnestly. "I was more pleased than hurt by what you said, for if you remember you spoke so highly of Norman."

"So I did of you, only I was not warm enough in my advocacy. I did not care to take the trouble to contradict any verdict Miss Sinclair passed. She is a mere nobody—a what one would call in a man a snob; besides, Muriel, she was jealous of you."

"Jealous of me!" echoed Muriel, in innocent incredulity; "what can she be jealous of me for? Surely I am the last person in the world to cause any one's envy."

Alan had a tolerable amount of self-confidence, but he could not, in the face of such humility, vaunt himself. He did not care to say, "Miss Sinclair thinks me the best catch in the room—well born, wealthy, handsome, and a parti whom it is well to be seen with." Miss Sinclair was of the world worldly. Muriel, in her childlike simplicity, had not the key to her behaviour.

"I do not think," continued Muriel, noticing Alan's silence, "that Miss Sinclair is a very pretty girl, is she? So I need not mind her thinking me very plain; we can sympathise with each other over our misfortune."

And as Muriel spoke she turned on Alan one of her sweetest smiles.

Alan caught it, and wondered how ever any one could call such a charming girl plain. He thought she had one of the nicest faces; her eyes were so expressive, and they never looked the same twice. He caught himself watching the play of her features over and over again.

"Do you know whom I consider the belle of the ball this evening, Muriel?"

"No, I do not; there are so many pretty faces; perhaps you think Miss Ponsonby is."

"No; I mean a young girl in white, very close to me."

Muriel looked about wonderingly, but there was no one near him except herself.

"Oh, Alan!" she said reddening, and speaking quickly, "let us talk about something else. You misunderstand me; I do not like compliments; they sit ill on me."

It was Alan's turn to colour; he bit his lips and looked uncomfortable. On their way back to Norman Muriel asked Alan how far his home was off.

"About four or five miles. We may call this

the half-way house between Astley Park and Stonecourt."

"Is Stonecourt the name of your place?"

"It is."

"What do you suppose made Norman faint this evening?" asked Muriel. "Do you think it was because he sat with his back to the horses?"

Alan was going to give a laughing denial. Boylike, he thought such an idea nonsense; but when he saw the grave earnestness of Muriel's face he turned the laugh off.

"Perhaps our conversation upset him," he replied quietly, "but he said it was the faint perfume of the flowers."

At that instant the band started the "Blue Danube."

Alan turned Muriel back.

"You will give me this waltz, Muriel?" he asked, putting his arm around her.

"I am already engaged," she answered, "but I shall not dance. I will go and release Ernest; Norman will miss me."

"Not for one short dance," urged Alan, throwing his blue eyes merrily on her. "Never mind your card. Whoever put his name down has forgotten it. Please."

And Muriel suffered herself to be whirled round.

She was a very good waltzer, light and floating. Alan exceeded the *short* dance, but Muriel's face was scarcely flushed when they stopped.

"Now we will return to Norman," said Alan, as the band ceased. "Do you know, Muriel, I think he studies too hard. For the last few weeks before we broke up he would hardly join in our outdoor sports—football or cricket, which he is so fond of."

"Do you often have games?"

"Every day, for an hour before dinner."

Norman did not seem much better when they returned; he still looked pale and listless.

"I wish I had not come," he said sadly. "I am spoiling all your enjoyment."

"No, no, no," said all three in loud disclaiming. "We should not enjoy it at all if you were away."

"I wonder whether Mr. Duerdon would let the carriage take me home; I really feel ill. Fresh horses could come next time."

"Where is Mr. Duerdon?" inquired Ernest. "I have not seen him since our arrival."

"He is in the card-room I expect," answered Alan; "that is where the seniors generally make for."

"Should I find him, Nor, darling?" asked Muriel, laying her hand softly on her brother's head; "I should much like to go home too. I am very sorry your head aches."

Norman threw a very grateful look at his sister.

"If you would not mind, dear," he said.

So Muriel went and found Mr. Duerdon; she had no difficulty under Alan's escort.

Mr. Duerdon looked slightly surprised, and his frown deepened as she made her request.

"Norman must rouse," he said. "It is not at all polite giving way in the manner he is doing. If he is not better after supper it will be time enough then to see what had best be done."

Muriel was very disappointed. She was going to plead earnestly, when a gentleman—a Mr. Sinclair, brother to the girl who had expressed her opinion so freely—came up and solicited the pleasure of that dance with her.

"You must excuse me following you here," he said, "but I have been searching for you in all directions."

Alan gave him a haughty stare.

"Miss Vivian is under my protection," he said; "I will take her back to her brother."

"Miss Vivian is engaged to me for this dance," answered Mr. Sinclair indifferently. "Would you wish to see her card?"

"It is so, Alan," spoke up Muriel gently. "Will you take care of Norman until my return? I will not be long."

Alan looked very displeased, but walked off in silence.

Muriel, whose heart was aching, tried to hide it as she took Mr. Sinclair's proffered arm. His coming just then had been most inopportune. A girl with less shyness and more tact would have been equal to the occasion, but Muriel was too afraid of giving offence.

"Poor Norman!" she murmured to herself, "I wish there was some way of getting you home."

So with a strange pain gnawing at her heart, for the forced dance and consequent absence from her brother, Muriel danced to that splendid air, "Fraume auf dem Ocean," the well-known German waltz, well known at any rate to Muriel. Her feet began to grow lighter as she listened to the tune. It blended just then with every feeling. Never again did she hear that air without it recalling Norman's fainting fit, the sickly odour of the flowers, the graceful dancing figures, and her own blank feeling of disappointment. It proved to be the supper dance. People began to file off in twos and disappear. Mr. Sinclair gave over dancing, and offered his arm to conduct her there, but Muriel had no wish for supper, neither did she care for Mr. Sinclair's society.

"Will you take me to my brother, in the end conservatory?" she asked, in a low tone.

"That cannot be allowed," answered Mr. Sinclair, insinuatingly.

"I wish to go," said Muriel, shyly. She had put a strain on her feelings sufficiently long, she felt as if she could endure no more.

He took no further notice of her request, but followed behind the other couples.

"Oh," exclaimed Muriel, excitedly, "I do not want to go to supper."

Mr. Sinclair glanced at her in astonishment.

"I claim you," he said, "this is the supper dance."

This was all Greek to Muriel.

"I do not know what you mean," she said, "but I want to go to my brother. He is ill!"

Mr. Sinclair stood still, and Muriel drew him away from the other couples.

"We are stopping the way," she said, coldly. "Get another partner and release me."

But Mr. Sinclair seemed strangely obstinate.

"I want to take the prettiest girl with me," he said.

"You will have difficulty in deciding who she is," replied Muriel, "there are so many pretty ones here."

"I have had no difficulty in arriving at a decision," said Mr. Sinclair, insinuatingly. "I am satisfied."

His meaning began to dawn on Muriel. The broad compliment, nay, to her in her refinement, the coarse flattery displeased her, it grated on her sensibility.

"I would wish to beg you good-evening," said Muriel, with a bow. "You can get another partner, and I will find my way to the conservatory alone." She moved off with haughty dignity wonderful in one so young.

"Stay, stay," cried Mr. Sinclair, "you cannot go like this. I demand you as my partner."

"What shall I do?" exclaimed Muriel, in distress, and the unusual commotion was beginning to be noticed around.

Alan happened to come in the ball-room, he came up in time to hear Mr. Sinclair.

"Come, come, Miss Vivian, I will not release you, come along." He went up to her as he spoke, and held out his arm. Muriel drew back.

Alan darted forward. The scene puzzled him.

"What is the matter, Muriel?" he asked, kindly, "is anything wrong?"

"Oh, Alan," answered Muriel, with a deep sigh, almost a sob, so greatly was she relieved by his presence. "Please take me to Norman, please—please do."

Her manner was very pleading, and she put great pathos into her voice.

"Of course I will, Muriel, why this distress?"

"I wanted to go, Alan, and Mr. Sinclair would not let me," she said, with drooped head. "But you will take me. will you not?"

"Certainly, dear Miss Vivian, take my arm," and turning to Mr. Sinclair he perfectly glared at him.

"How you could insult a lady astonishes me; yet I need hardly wonder."

The cutting sarcasm of this speech touched Mr. Sinclair.

"Her face is my excuse," was the rude answer.

Alan stood still, his countenance perfectly working. He was going to speak, but controlled himself.

"I will not quarrel before you, Muriel," he said, apologetically. "Come along," and they walked off.

Mr. Sinclair muttered something *sotto voce*.

"You will not quarrel, Alan, will you?" beseeched Muriel.

"I would not condescend to quarrel with that fellow, Muriel."

"That is all right," sighed the girl, relieved. "What an unfortunate evening it seems. Have I been very rude to Mr. Sinclair, will he never forgive me?"

"I should think that was of small consequence, Muriel. It is he who offended, not you. The fellow deserves sending to Coventry."

"Nevertheless Alan I should not like to be rude."

"Do not trouble yourself on that score, Muriel. Sinclair is a regular cad, how he got invited here is a mystery to me. Who introduced you?"

A puzzled look came on Muriel's face.

"I do not remember," she said.

"Why, where is Mrs. Duerdon, Muriel? I have not yet seen her."

"No, Alan, she is not here."

"Has she not come? Muriel, I don't think that is quite proper—quite *comme il faut vous comprenez.*"

Muriel laughed.

"This etiquette is a fearful thing," she said. "Tell me, Alan, why you were surprised to see Sinclair here?"

"Because the fellow's such a cad, not fit to mix in society."

Muriel wondered to herself why, if Sinclair was not good form, Alan was friendly with the sister. But she was too refined to put the thought into words.

"Did you not think his behaviour strange?" Muriel proceeded. "Alan, did you solve his motive in acting as he did?"

"No, had he any motive? He admired you, Muriel, thought your style and dress perfection. I heard him tell some one early, after our meeting, that you were the belle of the room."

It was rarely that Muriel blushed. She did so now; the hot blood surged to her cheeks, dyeing them crimson.

"He must have bad taste, Alan. Singularly bad, must he not, you could have set him straight. It was a pity he could not have found a nicer girl to talk about."

Alan stammered something. Muriel did not catch what he said.

"You do not mind?" she asked.

"You are very strange, Miss Vivian," remarked Alan, recovering. "Most girls like compliments — set themselves out to catch them."

"Then I am an exception, Alan; I dislike compliments exceedingly," she said, simply. "Admiration and flattery are for pretty girls. I merely claim what is due to my sex, truth and kindness from all."

They found Ernest still sitting with Norman. They were laughing merrily as Alan led Muriel to them. Norman did not appear to have missed his sister much.

"Now," said Muriel, sitting down by Norman's side, "Alan and Ernest must run off to their

supper or they will be too late. Norman would you like something to be brought to you?"

"No, thank you, Sis, there will be a second lot, you and I will go then."

Ernest did not move, and Alan threw himself down full length at Norman's feet.

"Are not you two going now?" asked Norman, presently.

"No," answered Alan, "I am not, we can go all together by-and-bye."

"Perhaps there will not be a second lot," suggested Ernest.

"Go now then, my dear fellow," laughed Alan, picking up a leaf that had fallen near him and tearing it to pieces. "I shall not venture. The big dons always go first. There are nearly two hundred people here at a rough guess, grown up and juveniles, and the tables will not hold more than a hundred and twenty. Let us be merciful."

So they waited and were well rewarded for it. They formed a merry quartette when they did go to supper. Norman seemed all right again. Many a young girl envied Muriel, the three lively youths she had round her supplying her every want. Muriel was perfectly happy. She felt so pleased that Norman had recovered. And Mr. Duerdon congratulated himself on going home that he had not listened to Muriel's petition for Norman's laugh and voice sounded the merriest of all.

CHAPTER VIII.

NORMAN'S recovery was not lasting. The next day and many days after he remained weak and listless, all life and energy gone, and Mr. Duerdon grew quite anxious. How he longed now for good Dr. Green, the bluff hearty practitioner, who had brought health and hope ever in his train. How he missed the kindly voice that was always so prompt and energetic in ordering and prescribing all that was necessary. Alas! it was hushed and still, nevermore would it be heard again, either in gruff pleasantness or in soft soothing tones suited to the patient's ear.

Mr. Belgrave was sent for. He was getting quite accustomed to his new sphere, but this was his first summons to Astley Park. He came in all importance. He was a small bald-headed man, with a glass stuck conceitedly in one eye and a very large ring on his little finger. What he lacked in appearance he made up for in consequence. It was difficult to think he could spare thought on others so full was he of himself. It would have been simply impossible to find a greater contrast to Dr. Green in every way. When he spoke it was in a high affected key that grated unpleasantly on the ear.

The impression he made on all at Astley was a very unfavourable one. Norman whose kindly sympathies were generally roused for strangers, took an unconquerable dislike to him. It was the more singular that he so rarely disliked any one. He could hardly be induced to say how he felt, or what was the matter with him.

It was Muriel who mentioned that he suffered much from his ankle; there was a heavy burning pain in it. Waiting in all suspense for an answer she was greatly startled to hear—

"Ah! ah! yes, yes, ankle, burning pain, ah! I daresay! Those are very fine engravings of yours, Mr. Duerdon."

"They are generally considered so," answered that gentleman, with eyebrows slightly raised. He considered the remark made just then in the light of a familiarity.

"My predecessor was a friend of yours, great friend I am given to understand," pursued Mr. Belgrave, with singular obtuseness. "Hope you will extend same favours and privileges to me, sure."

"Dr. Green was an old and valued friend certainly," said Mr. Duerdon, most significantly. "We miss him much."

"Aw! aw! you think me young, and my acquaintance new. That's a thing I shall mend of every day, aw! aw!" and Mr. Belgrave laughed a most unpleasant laugh.

Mr. Duerdon treated this remark with dignified silence.

With all his obtuseness Mr. Belgrave saw he had not pleased.

"Ah, his ankle I think you said!" Muriel was too indignant to answer. "Well he must rest it well. A growing pain, aw, will soon be gone. Nothing worse than that. My time is of importance, aw! Good-morning."

Mr. Duerdon rang the bell and a servant showed him out.

There was a dead silence for a few minutes after Mr. Belgrave's departure. All were pleased to be relieved of his presence.

Norman was the first to speak.

"To think," he said, "that such a fellow as that should have stepped into good true Dr. Green's shoes—it was incredible."

"Norman," reproved Mr. Duerdon, crossly, "you forget yourself."

He did not look into the boy's face, or he might have been tempted to keep back the reproof. The large clear eyes were dimmed by two big unshed tears.

"I do not like him at all," sighed Muriel, "he is the most objectionable man I have ever seen."

"We are none of us doubtlessly favourably impressed with his superior charms," allowed Mr. Duerdon, "but we must remember our opinion carries weight. We must be very careful not to

say anything which can tend to injure his position."

"Oh, Uncle Fred," said Norman, sadly.

"What, my boy?"

"I feel so sorry, altogether, Uncle Fred, and oh, so disappointed. I felt when I heard Mr. Belgrave was coming, much as I used to do when Dr. Green was alive, and the contrast was too great. He will never never do me any good."

"Poor Norman," said Mr. Duerdon, kindly, "I can enter into your feelings, I am sorry I reproved you."

"I deserved it, Uncle Fred, I know I did, but oh, how I wish we could send for Dr. Green. He understood me so well."

"Well, if you really dislike Mr. Belgrave, Norman, you shall have Mr. Shaw from Jycliffe. I do not like making the change, but we will do anything to get you right again."

Muriel was delighted.

"That will be better," she said.

But Norman shook his head. With his fine keen sense of right and wrong, he knew Mr. Belgrave ought not to be dismissed.

"It would never do," he said, "Mr. Belgrave bought the practice, believing that we were to be his patients. I wish we had seen the man before he came. We are punished for our carelessness. As far as I was concerned I gave the matter no consideration. I thought he would be sure to be nice."

"We are under no obligation to let him attend us, unless we really like him," observed Mr. Duerdon, with decision. "A medical man knows he runs the risk of being dismissed. We will give you a few more days in which to get up your strength, and to get rid of the pain in your ankle, and then if this does not succeed, Mr. Shaw shall be sent for."

No one made any reply to this, none seemed necessary. Mr. Duerdon spoke decidedly. Norman was wondering how he would like Mr. Shaw. He certainly had not a pleasant recollection of his doings in connection with Dr. Green's death. But then the circumstances were peculiar perhaps, Mr. Shaw's behaviour was the result of an over-fastidious perception of right. He might not have meant to be unkind. He certainly contended he had no such intention. Mrs. Duerdon entered the room.

"Have you all been to a funeral?" she asked, slightingly. "You are all three looking as grim as judges."

Norman got up from the sofa on which he was lying, and offered it to her.

"You get very indolent, Norman," she said, taking it from him. "You should not be lying about all day long."

Again large tears dimmed the lustre of the bright eyes.

"Norman is not at all well, Clara. You must excuse him for the present."

A few minutes later Norman and Muriel left the room. Norman slipped his arm through his sister's and leant on it.

"Let us go into the schoolroom, Muny," he suggested, "and if Mademoiselle does not object will you sing to me?"

"With pleasure, Nor."

They found the room empty. A large fire burned brightly in the grate—they always kept large fires at Astley Park. Bijou, Mrs. Duerdon's fat dog, lay in front of it.

"I should think Madam and Mademoiselle have been having a conclave," said Muriel, alluding to Mademoiselle's absence.

As she spoke she stooped down and lifted the pampered animal into a chair. Bijou snapped at her.

"Why, Bijou," she said, "you might understand your mistress's likes and dislikes. You would hardly have snapped at any one else, would you?" When I have a dog, Bee, it shall not be like you, a little petted cur, but a large noble St. Bernard, or a well-trained retriever."

Bijou resented these remarks by a deep growl.

Norman laughed. "Bijou understands," he said.

"Aye, he tries to be clever," said Muriel, going up to the sofa and wheeling it round towards the fire. It was a new importation since Mademoiselle's reign began. The schoolroom was now well and

comfortably furnished ; a pretty carpet was on the floor, and modern furniture all around. It was generally called "Mademoiselle's room" now, though Muriel and Norman still clung to the old title of schoolroom.

"Now Norman, lie down here," said Muriel, shaking a cushion up. "You will be very comfortable, and I will sing to you."

"I do not know whether I ought," deliberated Norman. "Madam seems to think me hopelessly idle."

"Never mind madam," declared Muriel, with scant ceremony. "You are tired, lie down and rest, Mademoiselle is not here to object."

"Perhaps she will come," urged Norman.

"What if she does, she has nothing to do with you."

"Should we go to Owen's room," asked Norman, "I shall not be disturbed there."

The night nursery had been fitted up as a schoolroom for Owen, and there Mademoiselle taught him daily. Mrs. Duerdon did not choose that her son should have the same room as the Vivians.

"Mademoiselle is equally likely to invade our retreat, there," responded Muriel. "Do not be obstinate, Nor, lie down and rest."

"A wilful woman," began Norman, but Muriel put her hand over his mouth.

"Be quiet, Nor, love, and I will sing to you."

"Will you try that 'Du du liegst mir im herzen?" asked Norman, "it is such a sweet thing."

Muriel complied.

Singularly melodious was her voice, rich and full and rarely sweet. It was a great gift, this voice of hers, and through Mr. Duerdon's kindness she was becoming a cultivated singer. From one song into another drifted she, knowing her audience to be well satisfied. She sang that charming song of Schumann's, "Lotus Flower," and a few more favourites of Norman's. When she finished she asked him if he thought he could manage a duet. He looked doubtful, but said he would try. Muriel selected "He wipes the tear from every eye," and they managed it capitally. If Mr. Duerdon could have heard them then it would have touched him, as few things touched him now. Nothing on earth could have been sadder and sweeter. Large tears rolled down Norman's cheeks—hot liquid drops. He wiped them hastily away; he did not wish his sister to see them. Muriel, quite unsuspicious of her brother's sadness, shut the piano and came and sat near him.

"I wonder," she said, meditatively, "whether Signor Tolli is right in ascribing the composership of that song, 'Am I not fondly thine own,' to the Prince Consort, he says it is generally supposed that his Royal Highness composed it."

"And I daresay he is right," assented Norman,

"though of course I cannot speak with any degree of certainty. The Prince Consort was a clever man. There is something strikingly touching yet simple about it."

The days went on and school began again. Norman was better, the rest had proved beneficial, but he was far from well enough to go to school. He insisted however, on going; he would not listen to a word of reason on the point. For the first time in his life he became obstinate. In the heat of argument he said—

"If I were almost dying I must go or else forfeit the exhibition."

Mr. Duerdon was thunderstruck. Was Norman really sober in his intentions? His guardian sincerely trusted not. He had heard the rules of the school before, read them at the time when Norman became a member, but so little importance had he attached to them that they had quite escaped his memory. Now to hear that not only did his adopted son expect to gain the exhibition, but that he also meant to accept it, angered and annoyed him exceedingly. Mr. Duerdon remembered the clause in the donor's will which distinctly stipulated that the money should be for the sons of poor gentlemen.

"Norman," he said, "you could not in honour accept the benefit of the exhibition. You would be infringing the very law of the will."

"In what way, Uncle Fred?"

"You are not the son of a poor gentleman."

"Virtually I am; my father is dead and I have but little money."

"You are my adopted son, and as such must not disgrace yourself."

"Oh, Uncle Fred, as if I ever should."

"I call it disgracing yourself to accept a gift dishonourably."

"I will never do that," said the boy. "Oh, Uncle Fred, cannot you see the great honour there will be in my gaining the scholarship? I shall be too proud to refuse it."

"I also am proud that you have abilities and perseverance enough to be the head boy. Let the distinction rest there; never let it be said that the adopted son of the wealthy Mr. Duerdon accepted charity."

"Uncle Fred, how can you?" exclaimed Norman, hotly. "Had I been your own son, perhaps I might not have taken the money. As it is, did I put you to the expense of sending me to college whilst I am able to go without; then and then only, could people honestly declare that I was receiving charity."

"There could be no question of it in anything that I could do," replied Mr. Duerdon. "You are in every respect as my own son. Go at my expense, and say no more about it. I do not wish you to accept the exhibition."

"You have done too much already, far too

much. You are the soul of generosity," spoke up Norman, warmly. "Rather would I stay at home than put you to such a great expense."

"Nonsense, utter nonsense, Norman. You quite seem to forget that I shall be at great expense as it is. The paltry sum you will receive from the foundation will be a mere crumb in the loaf."

"Ah, but Uncle Fred, there is Dr. Green's legacy, have you lost sight of that?"

"You will never touch that, Norman; I will forbid it."

"You must not do that, dear Uncle Fred. It is left to me to do as I like with, and I know the doctor meant it as a help and incentive to work, not a cloak for idleness. That or part of it, and the exhibition will take me to college very nicely."

"Part of it," exclaimed Mr. Duerdon, excitedly, walking about the room, "much you know of college and college expenses. I should ever wish you to act as a gentleman at college."

"Uncle," said the boy, gently, "can you not trust me that far? I hope I shall ever act as one. Money does not make the gentleman. How would it be, Uncle Fred, if I went to college and was very extravagant there, contracted idle habits, and was unable in the future to work for a living? was too much of a *gentleman* to be able to support myself?"

"Ah, that is an extreme case," answered Mr. Duerdon, irritably. "You are not likely to be-

have so. Even if the worst came to the worst I could do something for you."

"I have no claim on you, Uncle Fred. It is only your goodness that has helped us thus far. No; please, say no more about it. I should think I was doing wrong, absolutely committing a sin, did I let the talents God has given me rust merely because through false pride I declined a help which some wise and benevolent gentleman left years ago to assist such as I."

"Your ideas are absurd—utopian—ridiculous."

"I hope not," answered the boy, wearily. "Oh, Uncle Fred, do look at the thing in its right light. I have worked so hard and I mean to go in for honours at college."

"Right enough; all I want to insist on is that you go at my expense. I will give up then. When you get in the Church you may rest on your own oars."

"I cannot. Oh, I wish you would be reconciled to the exhibition. It has been my dream for years, am I to have it within my grasp and not stretch out my hand to take it? Never. Uncle Fred, I must take it."

"There is no good in talking," answered Mr. Duerdon, angrily. "We keep coming back to the same point. Pray for a better state of mind. Crush down your obstinacy. I will leave you now."

So saying he walked out of the room, and banged the door behind him.

"I have offended dear Uncle Fred," said the

boy, laying his head down on the table. "I have never seen him so angry before. What am I to do? My head aches and I feel very weary. I wish papa or mamma were alive, they would tell me what to do. After all the thing is to do right, and it is right of me to work for myself. I will accept the exhibition—I *must*."

A hand was laid on Norman's shoulder—a light, gentle hand. It startled him and he looked up. It was Muriel.

"Is it you, Muny?" he asked, well pleased.

"It is I, my brother; but what are you looking so white and wan about? Take my arm and we will go in the garden, the fresh air will bring the colour back to your cheeks. You look like an old man with that weary look."

Norman got up and they went out. A short conversation and Muriel knew all his trouble and difficulty.

"I think Mr. Duerdon is right this time, Nor," she said, almost apologetically. "Besides, if you do not wish to accept money from Mr. Duerdon there is mine, your own, and mamma's."

"Yours is totally out of the question, Muriel. The interest of mamma's and my own I shall take, the principal will be left in case of illness or misfortune."

"But you must have mine, Norman; I should be hurt and grieved beyond measure if you did not take some."

Norman laughed. "Why, Muriel," he said,

"I am going to fight my battle over again. I have escaped from Mr. Duerdon only to come to a fresh combat with you. It is a case of out of the frying pan into the fire."

"Well, Nor, darling, it is only because we all love you so," and Muriel laid her hand lovingly on her brother's arm.

"I know it well," he said, "well. But this is a case where less love would profit me more. I desire to work my way, Muny, love; I would be proud of the steep ascent I must climb."

"You are not strong enough, Nor."

"I feel equal to any difficulties; superior to weak shrinking from obstacles. Above all aids and luxuries—alone and unaided if possible, I would rise. There is a power within me which I feel strong and imperishable. I must succeed."

"Nor," said Muriel, reverently, "that is your soul, it is powerful I know, for good. Take care, my brother, that its power and might does not crush the feeble frame that so weakly hides it away."

Norman's eyes shone with a bright light, he was looking up into the clouds.

"I must succeed," he said, speaking in a subdued tone. "Muriel, help me. Look at the case from my side. Fancy you were me. Remember how I have studied for the honour I shall soon gain at Jycliffe, the pride and delight that will be mine, the unfettered independent spirit that

will be my possession, the being indebted to no one but my own energies. Do not think me wilful, headstrong, wayward, as I may seem to be, clinging to my own intentions, but view me as you always do, obedient and anxious to do right. Think of the labour of so many months given up and to profit no one. Had there been a poorer boy in the school whose prospects I was blighting, I would have surrendered at once."

"I know you would, Nor, dear."

"Had there been any one who had striven equally with me, and who desired the honour as I did, even then I might have been persuaded to give up, but there was no one." A pause. "The school likes to send a scholar to Cambridge; they take it as an honour. I have no claim on Mr. Duerdon; besides, Muriel, now that I have money myself, of course it must go before I touch his."

"Yes, and mine too," answered Muriel. "Norman, I believe you are right. Try and work your way independently. Only make me a promise."

"What is it?"

"That if ever you want help, you will take my money, yours is not much. After all, Nor, what is money, and power, or anything, so long as we can keep together?"

"Kind Muny," answered Norman, "your sympathy is a great help to me. I do not care to stand alone, condemned as headstrong, obstinate."

"We must try and make Mr. Duerdon see the

matter as we do, Norman, then you will be quite happy."

The Vivians found an unexpected and warm ally in Mr. Mervin. He applauded Norman's independent and brave spirit, and quite agreed with him in his intention of not being indebted to Mr. Duerdon's kind and well-meant generosity. He said he only wished Ernest could have gained such an honour. Ernest, though a good son, was not a particularly clever one.

But even with the Vicar and kind Mrs. Mervin on his side, Norman felt the battle waged strong against him for some time.

Most people saw the affair from Mr. Duerdon's side, and urged him to give in; not to be so foolish and utopian. Thus it went on for the first two weeks after Norman resumed his school duties.

Mrs. Duerdon and his own health turned the scale. By some strange coincidence no one had mentioned the subject to Mrs. Duerdon. How it had so happened was a mystery until explained. Norman and Muriel of course did not allude to any of their affairs before her, and Mr. Duerdon had not told, because he rarely vexed her with any grievance; and Norman's behaviour at this time was a decided grievance to him.

Mrs. Duerdon, however, was quick in reading her husband's manner. She saw there was something wrong, but as she felt all right, and Owen was well, it did not trouble her.

At last one day an idea occurred to her which caused her considerable fright.

"Suppose their money affairs were going to occasion them uneasiness; could it be that that Fred was unsettled about, and did not like to tell her?"

She must question him. Cautiously, yet surely, Mrs. Duerdon set to work.

Mr. Duerdon could not understand her innuendoes. So she spoke out plainly. Mr. Duerdon burst out laughing—the first good laugh he had had for many a day.

"What could put such an utterly unfounded idea in your head as that, Clara?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders in the old languid way, and gave a suppressed yawn before answering.

"Your own ridiculous behaviour, Fred; there must be something disturbing you, or else why behave so strangely?"

"Well, I have a small worry," acknowledged Mr. Duerdon. "It is nothing very great, it is only about Norman."

"Is that all?" replied Mrs. Duerdon equably. "He is right enough; the boy is only growing too fast. He's as thin as a lath."

"So he is likely to be," answered the gentleman irritably. "He studies and studies until he quite distresses me."

"It takes very little to upset you, Fred; you are always very foolish about the Vivians."

"True, Clara, I am. I look upon Millicent's children as a solemn trust, and I am always anxious to do the best for them. It was not Norman's languid looks that worried me; he seems to have picked up again since Shaw prescribed for him. I am annoyed about his obstinacy," and Mr. Duerdon related the whole circumstances for his wife's benefit.

Mrs. Duerdon listened patiently to the recital.

"Why, Fred," she remarked, as he concluded, "Norman has twice as much sense as you. For once the boy is right, and you would thwart him. You have done enough, more than enough, for 'Millicent's children,' as you ridiculously call them."

"That is a point on which we must agree to differ, Clara."

"That Millicent must have been a wonderful woman," continued Mrs. Duerdon jealously. "One is always hearing her praises spoken. I daresay if I saw her I could find plenty to find fault with in her."

"Oh, I have no doubt of that," said Mr. Duerdon coolly. "One woman is never perfect in another's eyes."

"If this Millicent could rise from her place, and take your place, she could hardly do more."

"I wish I could honestly think so," responded Mr. Duerdon. "Mrs. Vivian was a wonderful woman; it would be well if the world could be full of Millicents."

Mrs. Duerdon raised her eyebrows in astonishment; she did not care to hear her husband praise another woman, although that woman had been his half-sister, and was dead. He must admire her and her only. Her nature was poor, mean, narrow.

"Fred, I scarcely think you are aware of what you are saying," she answered coldly.

"You are mistaken; I am fully aware," said Mr. Duerdon quietly. "It is rarely I say what I mean. For once I have spoken out. Millicent Temple, or Vivian as she afterwards became, was my ideal of woman, as perfect as it is possible for any human being to be."

"Pity but what you had married her," sneered Mrs. Duerdon. "I have no faith in virtue that dead people possessed. To hear persons talk one might imagine that all good characters die whilst all bad ones live."

"It is too often the case, I verily believe. Anyway, I am not exaggerating when I speak warmly of my sister's memory."

"It is a pity, Mr. Duerdon, that you did not meet some one like her when you married me," said Mrs. Duerdon aggravatingly.

"It was a pity," returned Mr. Duerdon unwisely. His temper was rising. "Millicent and her type of woman were too good for me," he continued.

This was too much for Mrs. Duerdon's equanimity. She rose.

"Thank you very much for the compliment," she said. "I will leave you alone to ponder over and consider her numerous charming qualities. I do not believe in pieces of perfection," and she bounced out of the room.

"Phew," whistled Mr. Duerdon, throwing himself back in his chair, "I have done it this time. We seem to thrive on scenes, scarcely a week but we have one. All was true that I said. Millicent was an amiable good woman; yet perhaps it would do her children better service were I to ignore her excellencies in my wife's hearing. Strange that one person should object to hearing another person praised, but so I often notice it is. Ah, well, I will read a while and forget annoyances."

CHAPTER IX.

For many days after the fracas related in the last chapter Mr. Duerdon had cause to repent the open candour with which he had spoken of his step-sister's name. He found he had made a mistake in opening an old wound, and it was long before it again healed. Norman and Muriel were continually in disgrace, while even Mr. Duerdon himself could scarcely do a thing that was right. "Millicent's children" was thrown at him in all that he did or said. Mrs. Duerdon harped on the subject until her husband was half worn to death. He groaned in spirit, and in very desperation of despair contradicted all that he had asserted concerning Mrs. Vivian's superiority over other women. The number of falsehoods he told about this time lay in a weight upon him. "Continual dropping is said to wear away a stone." Mrs. Duerdon must have learnt that proverb by heart, so constantly did she act up to it.

One day on her return from a drive she told a servant to ask Mr. Duerdon to go into the drawing-room for a short time. It was seldom he now sought her presence unless, as in the present instance, she desired it.

"Clara," he said, entering the drawing-room, with lagging footstep that spoke of anything rather than a light heart, "do you want me?"

"I do," she replied coldly, "for a few minutes."

She sank on a fauteuil, and he walked away to one of the windows which commanded a view of the park.

"How can you listen to me," she asked, "with your thoughts given to outdoor objects?"

"I am all attention," he replied, "but I will sit down if you wish it."

He suited the action to his words, turning his back towards the window.

There was perfect silence for a minute; Mrs. Duerdon toyed with her handkerchief, Mr. Duerdon spoke.

"What do you wish to say?" inquired he. "Aitkens is waiting for me in the library."

"Aitkens can wait."

"Certainly, Clara, if your conversation is important. I thought by your silence that another time would be as convenient, whilst he is rather hurried."

"Aitkens and Aitkens' affairs can be attended to shortly. I will not detain you five minutes. What have you decided to do about Norman?"

"In what way?"

"In what way," repeated Mrs. Duerdon contemptuously, "are there so many ways you are so perplexed about him?"

"There are several."

"What are you going to do about his going to college?"

"Let him go of course."

Mrs. Duerdon tapped her foot impatiently.

"How stupid you are," she observed politely. "Is he going at your expense?"

"That is my earnest wish," returned Mr. Duerdon weariedly, "but so far he has not signified his intention of yielding to my wishes."

"The boy is wise; you must not combat his will any longer. The anxiety is making him ill."

Mr. Duerdon pushed the hair off his forehead back.

"It is not deference to my will that is affecting him," he said. "It is overstudy, Clara, and this I wish to prevent."

"You are wrong, Fred. Norman is a sensitive nature. Mademoiselle told me that she heard him tell Muriel that he could not endure your displeasure much longer, it broke his heart. Very absurd, but those were his words."

"I wish with all my heart that the boy would listen to reason; it is the first time Norman has ever caused me uneasiness."

"Ah," laughed Mrs. Duerdon, "every one feels the pinch when their own shoe is too tight. 'Millicent's children' can do wrong; even you see that."

"Norman is behaving with a degree of obsti-

nacy that I could not have accredited him with," sighed Mr. Duerdon.

"Oh, Norman is right this time; you are the obstinate one, Fred. Norman wants to put his shoulder to the wheel, and you will not let him."

Mr. Duerdon would have spoken, but his wife went on.

"I know what you would urge, about keeping your word to the dead—honour, and all those things, but you are entirely wrong. If the wonderful Millicent could speak now, it would be to beg that you would give way to her son's wishes. I myself feel sorry for the lad."

"Clara, are you beginning to take an interest in the Vivians?"

"Yes, I take an interest in 'Millicent's children' when it suits my purpose. You are ridiculous, a perfect simpleton. Where Owen is concerned you would be strict."

"Do not let us go over the old ground again," entreated Mr. Duerdon quietly. "The grass will be well worn off. I suppose, all things considered, Norman will have to take his own way. It may be, as you say, the best, and I give up because you tell me he is so distressed at my treatment. Owen nor any other consideration would not affect me. I will, you may be sure, take care of my own child."

Mrs. Duerdon shrugged her shoulders significantly.

"Then you will tell Norman so?"

"I will."

"Thank you, Fred. I need detain you no longer. Aitkens has not been kept long."

Norman was made very happy the next day, when, on meeting Mr. Duerdon, that gentleman said—

"Norman, I have been thinking over your great wish about the exhibition, and I have decided to let you do what you think best."

"Oh, thank you so very much," replied the boy gratefully; "how good you are, Uncle Fred."

And Norman seized Mr. Duerdon's hand, and pressed it between his own.

"I hope I have done all for the best, yet I doubt it," said Mr. Duerdon. "Norman, if you deprive yourself of any luxury, or if you study too hard and weaken your health, I shall never forgive myself. You have not been strong lately."

"I shall be all right," replied Norman. "I am happy now."

Norman never knew that he was indebted to Mrs. Duerdon's intervention for this sudden change in Mr. Duerdon's plan. He never even guessed it; how should he? He might have thanked her had he suspected what her influence, added to Mr. Duerdon's doubtful anxiety, had effected; though he would not have approved of her motive had he found it out. Still there are times when it is better to take things as they come—not to stop at and

cavil at motives or search out for reasons. And this was one. If Mrs. Duerdon's extreme meanness and penuriousness of character in all that affected the Vivians benefited them more than Mr. Duerdon's generous open-handed liberality would have allowed, what cause for them to blunder and pause over the why and wherefore? And Norman never stopped to reason the matter over; he went on his way glad at heart, happy once more.

A day after his restoration to Mr. Duerdon's favour Norman's pony became lame. It was caused by shoeing, and pretty Sultan had to have a rest. It was most unfortunate that it should have happened at this time, for Norman was not well enough to undertake the walk backwards and forwards to Jycliffe daily with impunity. There was a sharp frost at the time, which buoyed him up, and made him feel that he could effect much with an effort. But he was weak, so easily tired; he must try. Had the weather been rainy, then perhaps he would never have undertaken a task for which he was so totally unfitted.

"Oh," he thought, "would that Sultan's illness had occurred at a more favourable time; either during the holidays, when he could have rested, or else at a period when he himself had recovered more from the depressing influence of indisposition."

He did not say a word about Sultan's misfortune to any one, not even to Muriel. Norman's candour

and frankness deserted him. Allowance must be made for this; he had suffered so much from Mr. Duerdon's displeasure about the exhibition, and he was so recently released from feeling its power that he feared to fall under the same displeasure again. Go to school he must; he could not give up one day. No one must stop him.

For several mornings Muriel noticed that Norman left unusually early, but she thought nothing of it, nothing, at least, as to the reason. She supposed he was going skating, and rather rejoiced at it. She remembered what Alan Murray had said about his devoting all his time to his studies; and she was pleased to think that, if not yet equal to football or cricket, he was well enough to rise earlier and enjoy the pleasant pastime of skating. Afterwards she blamed herself greatly for so easily jumping to an improbable conclusion. Sooner than that Norman had walked to Jycliffe once even, she would have gone to Mr. Mervin and asked him to let her buy another pony, which could have been hers after Sultan was better. On the third morning, however, Muriel found out her mistake. Norman left even earlier than before, having scarcely touched a morsel of food. The schoolroom meals were always good; the housekeeper had strict instructions about that from Mr. Duerdon, and had he even omitted to give orders, it would not have mattered. Mademoiselle liked good living, and her wishes were always carefully at-

tended to. In addition to ham and eggs, their general diet, a fragrant dish of stewed kidneys steamed away as if to say "Smell how good I am." The cloth was as white as driven snow; but Norman's face in the early morn rivalled its whiteness.

"Are you cold, Nor?" asked Muriel, noticing him. "Draw your chair nearer the fire."

"Thanks," he said, shivering; "I am very cold. I never remember such a cold winter. I am starved all day long. My hands and feet are alike chilled, except that one place on my ankle, and there it is burning hot. I wish the heat could be more evenly distributed."

"You are not vell, Master Norman, you cannot be," observed Mademoiselle, glancing up at him. "You look so vhat de English call pale. You are too young to feel de froid; you should romp round the parks; one great romp and come back with the large appetite."

"Oui, oui, Mademoiselle," he said, smiling pleasantly; "vous avez raison mais je n'ai pas le temps."

He drank off a warm cup of coffee and broke up a small piece of dry bread, but only to toy with it, scarcely a crumb passed his lips.

"You are not eating any breakfast, Nor," remarked Muriel.

"I am not hungry."

"You shall have some sandviches," spoke up

Mademoiselle quickly. "Muriel ring the bell, I vill order them."

"Then I shall be well set up," smiled the boy. "I often feel as if I could take a little luncheon if I had it."

"Vhy not have demanded it sooner?" questioned Mademoiselle; "there are always gateaux in our cupboards."

"Cakes and biscuits," explained Muriel. "You shall have some every day for the future, Norman."

"You will make me wish to stay at home," said the boy, "and I must hurry off instead. I shall be late as it is; oh, my ankle."

And bending down, Norman tried to loosen his shoe.

"I do not comprends—understand, as you say; vhat is de matter with monsieur votre frère," remarked Mademoiselle. "No growing pain hurts comme ça. Why not have de ache in both de foots? Norman is decidedly not he-self, himself. I vill, I think, mention the affaire à Madame."

"Don't Mademoiselle, please don't," entreated Muriel earnestly. "Norman would not like it, indeed he would not. He is already annoyed at the restraint that has been put upon him. Sometimes I think it is over-anxiety at Mr. Duerdon's displeasure that has caused him to look so worried; but that is removed now. He will be all right again in a few days."

Mademoiselle shook her head.

"I daresay, too, he feels returning to school after our pleasant holidays; he had such a long rest then," continued Muriel.

"I think he wants a change," said Mademoiselle.

Like all foreigners, she believed there was nothing like change.

"He cannot have it then, Mademoiselle," answered Muriel decidedly; "he might just as well want the moon."

She arose and walked to the window. She expected a reprimand for leaving the table, but none came. Mademoiselle seemed too engrossed in her thoughts.

"Ah, there is Norman; good-bye, dear," she said, kissing her hands after him.

"Is your brother in sight yet?" inquired Mademoiselle; "he has been a long time."

"Yes; he has not reached the stables yet. He is walking very slowly. Oh, Mademoiselle, he is going by them; come and see; I am sure he is. What ever can he mean? Oh, Mademoiselle, let me run after him."

Mademoiselle hurried to the window to see for herself. Muriel's tones had been so eager and imploring that they almost compelled her to go.

"Yes, he is past the stables," assented Mademoiselle; "perhaps his pony is farther on. Run and see what he is about, Muriel."

Muriel needed no second bidding. She hailed the unexpected permission with glee.

"May I borrow this little shawl, Mademoiselle?" she asked, taking up one from a chair, where it had dropped from the Frenchwoman's shoulders.

"Certainement, allez vite."

With the small covering thrown over her head, and without another word, Muriel bounded down the stairs, across the hall and through the court-yard, after Norman. Mademoiselle watched them from the window; Norman's slow, weary tread, Muriel's quick, bounding step gaining ground at every move.

"Stop, Nor, stop," shouted she at the top of her voice; "where are you going."

The air carried her voice on; Norman stopped.

"Where are you going, Nor?" repeated Muriel; "where is Sultan? Oh, Nor, have I frightened you, dear?" she hastened to add. "Did I startle you?"

And well might she put the question. Norman's face was flushed and strange; two crimson spots burned in his cheeks. His eyes were bright as usual, but his breath came in laboured gasps.

"You startled me slightly, Muny; I—I did not expect you."

And even as Norman spoke, all colour died away, and he was as pale as he had been at breakfast time, if not paler.

"No, dear Nor; but I have often come on you suddenly before, and I never startled you then."

Norman flushed slightly again, and then raising his eyes to hers, smiled his own sweet smile, so much like her own.

"True, Muny; but then I was not doing wrong, and now I am."

"Doing wrong!" echoed she in amazement. "How can you be doing wrong?"

"Can you not guess how, Muny?"

"Not the slightest suspicion enlightens me, Norman. I scarcely believe you could do wrong."

"Let us walk on then, and I will tell you. Sultan is lame. Poor Sultan is lame, and"—

"So are you lame, Norman; you are a poor pair just now. Sultan will find your sympathy invaluable."

"He will; I am sparing him."

"Norman, what do you mean?" questioned Muriel, startled in her turn. "You do not mean that you are sparing Sultan at your own expense?"

"That is my meaning, Muriel."

"Well, then, Norman, you shall not do it," declared Muriel decidedly. "I never heard of such madness. I am really and truly angry with you. Why, Nor, you are no more able to walk than Mrs. Wilkinson's baby. You are indeed doing wrong. How long has Sultan been lame?"

"This is the third day. Muriel, do not you harden your heart against me. Be kind, and let

me continue on my way without any more questions."

"Take my arm, Nor; you have grieved me."

"Not beyond all hope of pardon, I trust," he said, smiling his bright smile again.

It was a smile that few could have resisted, certainly leâst of all Muriel. She was won over directly.

"Take my arm, then, to the end of the avenue."

"Dare you come, Muny?"

"I dare. Lean on me; do not be afraid; I am very strong. Why, Norman, how you limp!" she remarked, after a few steps, "and how heavily you walk."

"It is my ankle; it hurts me much," he said, trying to speak indifferently. "You stole a march on me this morning, Murry; but you are a good girl. I never thought you would have let me walk."

"Neither do I intend doing so. You cannot walk."

"Oh, dear!" gasped Norman in dismay. "I may as well turn back at once if you are going to turn against me."

"Do not be distressed, Nor. I have a plan in my head, darling, such a nice plan. I am going to ask Ernest Mervin if he will let you ride on his pony to-day; he is well able to walk. By to-morrow some other arrangement shall be made."

"A nice, thoughtful plan, Muny; but poor

Ernest, it is too bad to deprive him of the ride. I am afraid I am selfish."

"I most earnestly wish you were a little more so, Norman," breathed Muriel fervently. "Where will you wait whilst I go to the Vicarage to see Ernest? Will you rest at the lodge?"

"No, I will walk through the village. Ernest promised to wait for me this morning at the end of Wash Lane."

"Does Ernest know you are walking?"

"Certainly. He gives me a ride part of the way if I like."

"Let us hasten on to him then, as much as you can. He will have to let you ride both there and back to-day. Can you walk any farther now?" asked Muriel, looking anxiously at the tall, fragile figure by her side, at the crimsoned face, the panting breath. And as she looked many varied expressions chased each other over her face, each different feeling striving for mastery, until at last only a sorrowful look was left.

"Oh, dear Nor!" she said at last, speaking gravely and seriously, "I do not know whether you are doing right in going on; I am sure you are not well enough. Be guided by me; go back, and if you lose the exhibition never mind. It is one thing being independent if you are well, and another when ill. It is not as if you were compelled to work; you are not, and health is the first consideration. Turn back even now, and I

shall be so glad. If dear papa and mamma were alive you would attend to their—stay, do not interrupt me," seeing he was about to speak. "You must not think me unkind; I would not grieve you for the world. Only, dear brother, I love you so much that it makes me anxious about you; you are all I have; what shall I do if it knocks you up? There is that money of"—

"Hush, Muriel!" interrupted Norman, and the large tears rolled down his cheeks. "Bear with me patiently a few days longer, only a few days; if I am not better by then I will give way. Be patient; do not make it harder. I scarcely know myself yet what is best."

"I will be patient then, Nor." Anxious to change the conversation, she said, "How all the people stare at us, and they all have a pleasant word for you. Am I something of a guy, Norman?"

"Just the least bit so," smiled Norman. "We shall soon be through the village. You need not mind any one, Muny; they all like us."

"They all like you," corrected Muriel; "I can see it in their faces. I am more of a stranger to them. Why, you know everybody."

"I believe I do. Yes, the Astley people and I are great friends."

One strong man breaking stones on the wayside just out of the village touched his cap, and Norman stopped to speak to him.

"Well, Bennett, you have got work nearer home, I daresay you are glad."

"I have, Master Norman, but I don't mind much about it. A mile more or less makes little odds to me. That copybook's near done, sir; will you please get me another? I have left the coppers for it to whoam. Are you better, Master Norman? You looks bad, sir; s'cuse me asking."

"I'm a little bit tired, Bennett," answered Norman, smiling. "Bring your twoponce here to-morrow, and you shall have the copybook. This is my sister, Bennett; you have heard me speak of her. She is taking me a little bit of the way to school. She ran out, you see, and did not stay to put her things on."

"Poor miss," mumbled the man to himself, and something else that Muriel could not catch.

"My brother has not been well all the holidays," explained Muriel.

"No, miss, I know he has not," replied Bennett, and he gave a look so full of meaning into Norman's face that the girl could not but notice it, and, as they afterwards proceeded on their way, she observed the same covert, pitying glance bestowed on Norman by every one. What did they mean? She must ask some one. Did they all think Norman looked very ill. There was a tight feeling at her heart, and had been ever since she had overtaken Norman in the avenue. She was glad when they reached Wash Lane. Ernest was

there, patiently waiting. With all her endeavours to help, and bearing Norman's weight, it had taken them a long time to come. Ernest promised to let Norman have the use of his pony for the whole week if Norman would only accept it, and Norman, thoroughly fatigued and exhausted, was too glad to agree without a demur. Muriel watched Norman mount, and then said—

"I shall have to fly back, or Madam will be missing me." She spoke gaily, and as if all was right, but she had misgivings. "Ernest," she continued, "take great care of Norman. I leave him in your charge. You are very kind to him. We will repay you some day when we find out how."

"The obligation is on my side," returned Ernest politely. "I am always glad to do anything for Norman."

Muriel ran off. She had arranged all satisfactorily for Norman; she was beginning to think about herself now. She must hurry, or there would be war in the camp. There was only one thing to detain her, and that need not keep her long. She wanted to speak to the stone-breaker by the roadside, but as she reached him she grew shy, and wondered what questions she could ask him. She stood for a few moments. The man had his back towards her, and was whistling a tune —some hymn tune, that Muriel knew. She coughed; he looked round suddenly.

"Good-morning, missy! Have you left the young gentleman on the road?"

"Yes, Mr.—Mr.—I forget your name. I heard Norman use it."

"Bennett," interposed the man; "Richard Bennett, at your service. But my name's not o' much consequence to such as you. I'se generally called Richard. Master Norman, though, he do call me both ways, Bennett or Richard, and they either sounds well from him."

"Does my brother buy you copybooks, Mr. Bennett?"

"He do, miss, and reading books too, and he gets 'em sights cheaper nor what we can. He gets 'em for lots on us. Some people do say that Master Norman must put a mort o' money to 'em. I doan't know 'bout that. I asked him once, and he said, 'What a question, Bennett!' but he did not go for to deny it, and he smiled that there pleasant that his face looked like sunshine. A pleasant gentleman is Master Norman."

"You like my brother?" ventured Muriel timidly.

The man gazed at her, and she looked back at him, the delicate girl, and the strong, hardy worker.

"Well now, miss, that are a question if you like. Do I care for myself, miss, do you reckon?"

"Of course you do; everybody, even the most foolish person, likes themselves."

"True, miss, true for you; but it's not everybody as likes some 'un else better'n theirselves, is it? Now answer me that."

"Certainly not," was the grave reply.

"Well, miss, I like that handsome, personable brother o' yourn better'n I like mysel', ten times better'n. There's a lot of us in Astley as would die for him, he's that liked."

"Is he?" said Muriel, delighted. "Oh, I am glad."

"You see, miss, he's got that sort of face that working folk like us think so much on, cheerful and pleasant. There's always a bright smile on it, no dull, glumpy looks; he's always the same. But then the way he stops and talks to us common 'uns is a sight to see; it real-ly is. He speaks as if we were no better'n himself, and he, as any one can see, a real straightdown gentleman. Many a time 'as he shaken hands with this 'ere very hand," said Bennett, extending a hard, horny palm, and looking at it with pride.

"Oh, yes, I am sure he has," answered Muriel gently. "He would be pleased to do that."

Bennett stared at her.

"I tell you what, miss; it's a rare pity as your pa and ma was not spared to see what a nice young lady and gent you are."

"They can see us," answered Muriel softly; "they are always taking care of us."

"Taking care o' you!" replied the man. "Oh, aye, I see. You means they's angels a-watching

over you. They must be mighty sorry, then, to see Master Norman."

"Why?" questioned Muriel. "What should they be sorry about? They would be proud of Norman; he's so good, nearly perfect."

The man gave her one quick, searching glance, and then went on breaking stones. Muriel walked up close to him, and she was surprised to see him draw a coarse, dirty sleeve straight across his face, and wipe his eyes as if there had been tears in them.

"Are you in trouble, poor man? Is your wife or some one ill?"

She had got so interested in the man that she was forgetting her need to hurry home.

"My wife's well enough, and so are all youngsters, miss. You'd better be making for the Park now. Master Norman mightna be pleased at your dawdling i' this style."

"Thank you; I will go directly. Mademoiselle, my governess, will be waiting to teach me." Then she added, with true refinement, "I have enjoyed my little chat with you, and Norman will be pleased."

"You are like rest of us, miss; you thinks a mort o' Master Norman."

"Of course I do; he is my brother."

"Aye, so he is; poor Master Norman!"

"Why do you say poor Master Norman, Bennett?" inquired Muriel.

There was a pause.

"Well, he's noan so rich," answered the man evasively.

"I do not think you meant that," said Muriel thoughtfully. "You spoke with such feeling, as if you meant what you said from your heart."

"Aye, so I did mean it, miss, and if I could die and save Master Norman, I'd die ten times over."

"Why," asked Muriel, startled, "what makes you say such a strange thing as that? Norman is in no danger, is he?"

The man made no reply, only went on working hard with his work.

"Do you think my brother looks ill?" asked Muriel presently, with a strange choking sensation in her throat.

"Do 'ee go whoam, miss," entreated the man. "You will get scolded for staying talking to me. Now go whoam, there's a good young lady."

"I cannot go until you tell me more; you have made me uncomfortable. What do you think is the matter with Norman? Do you think he looks ill? You have said either too much or too little."

"He looks none so well; anybody can see that wi' half an eye."

"I know he is delicate; but you do not consider he looks seriously ill?"

"What do you mean, miss, by seriously?"

"Why, gravely—dangerously. You do not

think"—here Muriel gave a great gulp—"you do not think he is very ill?"

There was a dead pause; the man did not evidently wish to speak.

"Oh, please tell me," pleaded Muriel in earnest entreaty. "Has any one told you he is very, very bad?"

She seemed to place great trust in the man's opinion.

"No," replied Bennett firmly, "no one has told me that. It's only what I thought myself, miss, and I'm but a rough working man. You'd far better go whoam and ask the gentry. They're softer like, and puts things i' a nicer way."

"But do you consider Norman in danger?" asked Muriel in strange persistency.

It was as if she had found a true friend of Norman's, and would search into his very heart.

"Well, miss, how can I best tell you so as not to wound your feelings? I do think Master Norman's very ill, but I'm nobody. Perhaps in a little bit he will be all right again."

"You think he will soon be better?" persisted Muriel.

"Well, miss, there's no telling. He do look bad for sure."

"Oh, I see," said Muriel, struggling to hide all emotion, yet nearly breaking down. "You call Norman 'poor' because he is ill. Please tell me what had best be done. What's the matter with him?"

Again there was no reply, and she proceeded piteously—

"Please tell me what you think, because I've no friend to tell me anything. What illness do you consider my brother has?"

The man was poor and rough and unlearned, but he had a heart that would have done credit to a monarch, and it ached just now. He noticed her trembling lips; he could see her chest heave with suppressed emotion.

"Now go back to your friends, miss, and forgive me what I've said. I'd no call to make you uncomfortable; you takes too much heed o' what I say. Master Norman's very likely all right, but many a one wi' clear skins and rosy cheeks like his are 'sumptive. They dies as they grows up."

"Oh, dear!" said Muriel in great distress. "What's the use of their being born only to die? It seems very cruel."

"Aye, aye," said the man, shaking his head. "A mort o' people older nor clever'n you have asked that question; but you see, miss, God knows best. I often say that such faces as Master Norman's teaches us a lesson so truthful and good-like; mayhap they are like that i' heaven. God sends them to give us a glimpse of His beautiful world, and to make us long to follow 'em."

"Yes," replied Muriel, "I often thought Norman's face was like an angel's."

It was wonderful how she talked to this simple

working man. It was the power of sympathy that drew her to him, but she did not know that.

"I'd a dear little lass once wi' blue eyes and golden hair like a gentry child. We were raren proud of her. She died, and the man put on her little gravestone, 'For of such is the kingdom of heaven.' I was a long while puzzling over those words; I could not make 'em out, 'for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' I had no clue. Day after day I repeated 'em to myself, until at last they struck me all o' a sudden. And often now, miss, when I sees Master Norman, I says to mysel', 'For of such is the kingdom of heaven.'"

"Oh! but," said Muriel with a strange gasp, "you never thought that Norman would—would die too. Oh! say you never thought that. All I feared was that you thought him ill. Oh! Norman, my bright, beautiful brother, he could not die."

She had only just grasped the man's meaning. Such an idea as death had not until this moment—not in connection with Norman at least—entered her head. What an awful idea it was! Bad as she had thought the separation had been for a time, it would be nothing in comparison to "for ever." Years and years without him! Oh! she could never endure it. When she was realizing that he was ill, very ill, it was hard to bear, but to die—she had never thought of that. Pain, sickness, long nursing, but never death—cold, icy,

cruel death. It was more than she could bear; she moaned aloud.

"Laws, miss!" exclaimed the man, really frightened, "how skeered you looks! Take no heed of me. Go whoam, there's a nice young lady, and forget Bennett and his words. He's a rare croaker, and noan to be relied on."

Muriel's was indeed a pale, scared face. She stood motionless, and might have been turned into stone. She made no answer to Bennett's last sentence; perhaps she never heard it. He was quite distressed.

"You've no call to look like that, Miss Vervain," proceeded he. "I'd no right to speak as I have done."

Still no reply, no sound; no words issued from her lips. She stood there bodily, but her spirit was so far—oh, so far away. She might have been—if such a thing were possible—a living corpse. As Bennett's last words fell on her ear she roused herself. "Go home." Yes, she would go. She passed slowly onwards. There was no hurry—no dread of a reprimand now. No; she herself was forgotten. But what dreadful blow had fallen? Was Norman going away? Was Mrs. Duerdon angry? What was it? Then again the full burden rushed on and overwhelmed her. The iron had entered her soul. All, all her past troubles fled by the side of that grim trouble. Some people may think it strange that she

placed such implicit faith in Bennett and his words, but they must remember her friendless position; also her own instinct, which told her that he might be right. His strange earnestness, honest words, and evident reluctance to grieve, had all impressed themselves on her.

Why had no one told her before? What did Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon think? How was it that Norman had never spoken? Surely if he were in danger he would have known; but would he have told her. It could not be true. No; he would not have gone to school. Where was the use? If he were going to die he could not—oh! he could not—gain the exhibition; at least—and her heart gave a dreadful start—he could not keep it. No, no; he could not, must not die. Still there was the probability. Until that morning Muriel had hardly ever thought of death; of course old people died, but then both she and Norman were years off that; no fears of death had ever assailed her. Norman was delicate, so were lots of people; he would grow stronger, so she had always thought. For the first time she realized that he might not. It was a sudden and awful waking from a pleasant dream. Norman's limping walk, want of strength, appetite, all occurred to Muriel's mind. How dense she had been! Bennett watched Muriel walk off.

"Her looks uncommon bad, poor little lady," mused the man; "yet I doan't think her was conscious like, her looked so strange."

That Muriel's grief was great Bennett did not understand from her behaviour. True she had moaned once, but only once. Bennett was accustomed to sorrow of the loud, demonstrative, outspoken sort, not the silent way that tried to bear bravely an untold burden heavier than it was almost possible to bear. Stunned, bewildered, dazed, yet never by so much as a murmur revealing the awful aching within. This kind of heroism Bennett had no knowledge of; how should he? Luckily it is not common. He congratulated himself that he had fenced with Muriel's questions well.

Bennett was one of a certain class common amongst hard-working people—rough, outspoken, blunt, yet with a warm-enough heart within. Had any one less refined than Muriel been speaking to him, he would have said just what he thought straight out, but Muriel's refinement touched even him. He saw she was of another type, cultivated, refined, and therefore he tried to shape his words accordingly. Instead of replying, "Die! of course he will; there's no hope for him; you may order the coffin," or some similar coarse reply, he spoke as we have seen, carefully, and as he congratulated himself, successfully.

"Aye I answered her well," he said, breaking away at the stones. "May he die?" did she ask in that sweet little lady's way of hers. "Aye bless her earnest face—I do think he'll die. I think nothing 'i this world 'll save him.

But I worn't a going to tell her so, oh dear no. He's one of them 'ere 'sumptive cases like Becky Morgan's. Bless 'em both miss and gent they're a fine couple and fine wrapped up i' each other. The little lady's a nice face too, so earnest and grave. Many a time have I seen 'er i' church but I never thowt what a nice little way she had about her. Aye yes, Master Norman 'll die or my name's not Bennett, but I worn't a going for to let on so, dear no, Richard worn't born yesterday."

And the man worked away as if for his life, perhaps getting rid of the trouble at his own heart by this superabundant amount of energy, for in his rough way Bennett was very fond of Norman.

CHAPTER X.

Muriel walked home as if in a stunned dream. How she got there she never knew. Years after when she thought of that walk she always shuddered and as long as she lived she wondered whether she had been really conscious then. Thought and memory came to her in crossing the hall. For the first time since she had left Bennett she became aware of what she was doing. And just then the large hall clock chimed and struck ten times. "Ten o'clock," said Muriel as each stroke sounded loudly on her ears. "I had no idea of how the time was going. It seems days since breakfast this morning." As she went up the stairs, Sarah the schoolroom maid met her—

"My word Miss Muriel, you'd better hurry," said the girl with emphasis. "I am sadly feared you are in for it—Missus and Mademoiselle just have had words over you. They're nearly come to a row. Mam'selle says Master Norman was malade—I do not know what she meant but them was her words and Mrs. Duerdon said 'Malade! bosh! she had no patience with such coddling.'"

"Norman was ill Sarah—Mademoiselle was right."

"Let me take that little shawl from you Miss

Muriel—you must be starved. I waited about to give you a word of warning. I never like you to be in trouble miss, perhaps if you keep out of Mrs. Duerdon's way it will all pass over. Master said Mam'selle had acted as he would have wished her to do and that made the missus angrier"—

Muriel sighed—

"You are not afraid miss, I do not think perhaps there will be much said."

It was a wan weary face that Muriel lifted to the girl—white and set but there was no fear in it. It was a dull vacant look such as one sees frequently in an imbecile and there was actually a poor attempt at a smile.

"Thank you Sarah," she said wearily "you are always kind, where is Mrs. Duerdon, I must go to her, I have something to say."

"My word Miss Muriel don't go just yet, you'd better walk miles the other way until missus has got over her tantrums. Take my arm miss, and I'll help you to the schoolroom, your face do look so downright strange."

Muriel took it, glad of the support; but another feeling was coming on now, the heavy stupefaction produced by grief in some as by drink in others, was passing off and a hot feeling of unrest and a desire to be doing something—no matter what was coming on.

"We will go to the schoolroom first Sarah," she remarked; "I will explain to Mademoiselle what

I am going to do. It is only her right to hear; let us hasten."

Arm in arm the kind-hearted domestic and the desolate young lady hurried along the wide corridor to the schoolroom. Sarah would have taken Muriel to the very door, but she caught sight of Mrs. Duerdon coming in an opposite direction. She was walking briskly, a most unusual proceeding on her part. Sarah let go of Muriel's arm hastily—she feared to get her young lady into deeper disgrace.

Muriel walked bravely on: they met just at the schoolroom door. It was open and Mrs. Duerdon passed in without vouchsafing one word to the delinquent—Muriel followed—Mademoiselle was seated at the table ready for lessons. Mr. Duerdon stood by the fire mending a quill pen and his wife took a seat on the sofa, a formidable trio for Muriel to encounter, but she never noticed them, or if she did, she passed it by with indifference. Self and punishment were of small consequence now. Let them punish her as they liked. All she cared for was to be sure that Norman could not—would not die of consumption—as so many young people Bennett told her did die. Norman was ill easily tired, weak and languid, could all this by any possibility turn to that fearful thing consumption? She must find out. Let them do their worst to her afterwards. Without the least fear she addressed herself to Mr. Duerdon—she had walked close to him—

"Do you consider that Norman is in any danger of being consumptive," asked Muriel abruptly.

"My dear girl what an absurd question," answered Mr. Duerdon, "do I think you will be made Queen of England."

"I should much like to know what"—

"So Miss Vivian," broke in Mrs. Duerdon "you are beginning your old fly-away habits again which I thought I had crushed. Starting off in your reckless way before breakfast is finished with only thin slippers on your feet and a small shawl over your head disgracing us all—arm in arm with Norman like a couple of ridiculous lovers—off you go the laughing-stock of the country."

"Norman was ill," murmured Muriel.

"Ill; affectation and nonsense. I am ill, but you do not rush after me."

Muriel was silent. She did not wish to exasperate Mrs. Duerdon needlessly. She waited with great patience to resume the conversation as to Norman's health, which Mrs. Duerdon had so abruptly interrupted.

But no behaviour could have annoyed Mrs. Duerdon more. Silence gave a tacit consent. No word of sorrow or contrition for her offence, no apology for ill deeds, merely a quiet, passive bearing of disgrace.

"How dare you go out in the manner you did?" questioned Mrs. Duerdon angrily.

Mr. Duerdon bit his lips and looked annoyed.

"Madame know that I gave Mees Muriel the permission; I before said so," interposed Mademoiselle politely.

Muriel looked gratefully at Mademoiselle Loisel, and there was a ray of hope also on the girl's face—hope, not for the mitigation of her punishment, for that she did not trouble herself about in the least, but a hope that Mrs. Duerdon would be sufficiently appeased to forbear any more fault-finding, and pass a speedy sentence.

How vain such illusions! and so only those who in any way understood Mrs. Duerdon's character could judge. Mademoiselle's intervention angered more than it soothed. And Mrs. Duerdon launched out against Muriel with great bitterness, as she had done many times previously, though never quite so openly before Mr. Duerdon. She stayed at nothing now. Her dislike to the motherless and defenceless girl was very apparent.

Mademoiselle seemed surprised, although it might have been difficult to say what occasioned her astonishment, for she read Mrs. Duerdon's character like a book. And if these scenes had been of rarer occurrence lately it was perhaps as much due to the French lady's tact as to the great change in Muriel's indifference to Mrs. Duerdon's injustice.

"I will break your vile spirit, I will crush you," declared Mrs. Duerdon vindictively. "There shall be obedience in this house."

Mr. Duerdon fidgeted and fidgeted, but so far he had said nothing. Perhaps he thought he would be only adding fuel to flame. But his patience even was fast oozing out. He could not stand it much longer.

"Well, well, Clara," he said at last, "if Muriel has sinned greatly in your estimation, you have scolded her enough now. She is sorry to have offended. I am sure it was not intentional. Forgive her."

"Yes, Madame, lay the culpability, the fault on me. I was to blame; I said to Mees Muriel, '*Allez vite.*'"

"And do you consider, can you honestly assert that she did go quickly?"

"*Oui, oui,* Mees Muriel vent quickly, but the *mal,* the ill, was she did not come back quick. She must have stopped with Master Norman."

"That is what I object to," owned Mrs. Duerdon. "Is it not sufficient that their affection for each other is so clearly demonstrated here but that they must go rushing about the country after one another, vaunting their happiness in each other's society?"

It was a hard pill for Mrs. Duerdon to swallow was the orphans' affection and love for each other. It caused her jealousy to burn like fire.

"After all Clara, Muriel has not sinned beyond forgiveness. Forgive her, and let her go on with her lessons."

Mrs. Duerdon completely ignored this speech. She turned to Muriel.

"Obstinate and deluded child, how far did you go?"

"To Wash Lane."

"Wash Lane," repeated Mr. Duerdon in surprise. "Oh, Muriel, what made you go so far?"

Mrs. Duerdon gave a triumphant look as much as to say—

"Ah, I told you she was bad; you will soon all see I was right."

No one noticed her. Both Mr. Duerdon and Mademoiselle were watching Muriel. Their interest was fixed on the young girl's face, so strange and ungirl-like did she look in the first hour of sorrow.

"I went with Norman, Uncle Fred, because—because"— here her voice faltered. "I went with him simply because he could not go by himself."

"Why did he walk to the lodge?"

"Because Sultan is lame and cannot go; Norman is quite limping also, his ankle is so painful, but he denies himself the rest that he gives to his animal."

"Wise boy," muttered Mrs. Duerdon.

"That must not be allowed, Muriel. Norman is, in my opinion, too ill to go to school at all, but most decidedly far too ill to walk. He must ride

Owen's pony for the present. That will be the best, will it not, Clara?"

"Never," almost shrieked Mrs. Duerdon. "Is nothing belonging to us too good for these abominable children? Is there not one thing they must not claim? Is all free to them, even to the pony of my son? My son, mind, not the son of some poor nobody for whom no one cares. He shall not have it. I am tired of this fuss over Millicent's children."

"You are right, Mrs. Duerdon," replied Muriel with dignity, a new-born dignity sprung of sorrow that sat strangely on the lonely girl. "I also am tired of these injustices. There is no reason why we should submit to them. Norman must not have Owen's pony, not because it is too good for him—there is not one in the world belonging to duke or prince that would be too good for him—I wish that was the reason, but because he is ill, too ill, alas! to go to school again."

Her voice broke down completely, but only for an instant. Muriel had not been accustomed to keeping her feelings under control for nothing.

"I could get him a pony to-morrow, with pleasure," went on the girl sadly. "I have only to go to Mr. Mervin, and he will give me as much money as I want, but where is the good? Norman could not profit by it, he is too ill."

"You talk about your money as if it were endless," laughed Mrs. Duerdon mirthlessly. "You will soon find it a paltry sum."

The laugh grated on Muriel's ears, but she passed it by.

"Mr. Duerdon," she said, "I appeal to you for help. I am breaking my promise to Norman, but oh! I did not know then all that would happen. I cannot help it. You must not let him go to school any longer. Will you not forbid, actually forbid, his going to Jycliffe until the summer? If he gets stronger you can let him go again. He is ill, oh very ill; will you not help me?"

The piteous appeal and tones quite touched Mr. Duerdon.

Mademoiselle got up and left the room.

"Certainly I will, Muriel. Make your mind easy about Norman. He will, I feel sure, soon be all right again. Why are you so suddenly anxious about him? There is no need."

"Oh, it is only a blind," interrupted Mrs. Duerdon angrily. "The girl is so deceitful, it is only her depth. She thinks by calling attention and sympathy on Norman she draws punishment and disgrace away from herself."

"You know that is an untruth," answered Muriel calmly. "Would that it were so—would that it were! Norman is ill. Every one in the village knows it; you can see it by their glance."

"Nothing but what rest, nursing, and medicine will set all right, and a change of air, if necessary, so send your trouble away. And now, my dear girl, go and kiss Mrs. Duerdon; she will forgive

you, I know. It is only a little misunderstanding. Tell her how sorry you are for annoying her by your late escapade, and how unintentionally. I want us all to be happy together; none of these miserable scenes which are so very unpleasant. Go, my dear," and Mr. Duerdon rubbed his hands together.

Muriel hesitated for one half-second, but so quickly was the delay over that it was almost imperceptible. Then with a more cheerful look she went up to Mrs. Duerdon.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Duerdon," she said quietly; "I am sorry if I have offended you. I assure you such was far from my desire."

And Muriel bent forward as if to kiss the lady's cheek.

Mrs. Duerdon with a forbidding smile peculiarly her own drew back.

"*If* you offended me," she repeated, "does there remain any doubt yet in the dense folds of your mind? Go away, Miss Vivian; no kiss of yours shall ever touch my face. The sight of you has been my bane for years. I vowed when I first came to live here that I would get you sent away. That that vow has not been kept is not my fault. I have tried to crush you in vain, and I dislike you all the more. Your presence is hateful, your manners offensive"—

"Oh," groaned Mr. Duerdon in dismay.

"The fuss and stir," continued Mrs. Duerdon,

'that has been made over you both, the way you have both been cajoled and petted as 'Millicent's children,' has quite maddened me. Who are you both that I should have to give way? I am determined from this hour that, in spite of all opposition, that I will turn you out. Your home from henceforth shall not be where mine is. I cannot breathe the same air."

Muriel drew herself up proudly.

"Your own speech betrays you," she said. "You own your bitter hatred and persecution. What had Norman and I done to offend you, two defenceless orphan children? Yet the day of your arrival here as a bride, you sent us both away in disgrace. At least you sent me, and Norman with his baby-love followed. Childlike he knew your feelings, though it was many years before we comprehended it. Now that we do understand it, we do not like it any better. Send us away at once. Anywhere—anywhere. Please send us away; anything is better than to go on as we are going on."

"Hush, Muriel," said Mr. Duerdon gravely, "you know not what you ask; it cannot be. Yours and Norman's home is here."

"Not unalterably, irrevocably," cried Muriel. "Oh, please, Mr. Duerdon, please send us away. Make arrangements for us to be received as boarders into a kind home. Norman would have to give up the exhibition too then, and we should

not always be doing wrong—not wrong really, you know, but what passes for it. Please send us somewhere where people would love and care for us."

"I will see, Muriel; I will think the matter over, my child. In the meantime you and Norman shall have a change."

"It will be the best, Uncle Fred, far the best. Norman will be angry with me at first, because he wants to go to Jycliffe, and I have broken my word to him. I promised I would be patient for a few days. Oh, Norman, Norman!"

The sad wail in Muriel's voice quite upset Mr. Duerdon.

"It is the only time in my life that I have ever broken my word to him," continued the girl sadly. "But why am I placed in such a position? I cannot let him go on and work, and fall, perhaps, into a consumption. Why did not some one else stop him without my interfering?"

"I would have prevented, Muriel, if I could, but he has been thoroughly bent on going to school," said Mr. Duerdon.

"So he has," agreed Muriel, "but what shall I do if anything happens to him. He is all I have to love—he is father, mother, sister, and brother," wailed the girl. "No one else in the whole world cares for me but Norman. Oh, what must I do, what can"—and she here broke down again.

She abandoned herself entirely to her grief this time. With a full sweep the tide of her sorrow came tumbling on—on it came as the rush of some

mighty river. As the fall of a heavy avalanche, strong and powerful, it crushed her until overcome and no longer able to bear up she collapsed completely.

Mrs. Duerdon gave a withering glance at the bent figure.

"Very fine acting—touching in the extreme," murmured she. "Pity the audience is not larger."

So saying, the lady picked up her handkerchief and sailed out of the room.

Mr. Duerdon was left alone with the sorrowing girl. At first he was undetermined what to do. He glanced irresolutely at the weeping Muriel. He could not bear to see any one in grief, much less could he stand their crying. So he stepped up to Muriel and lifted her gently from the ground, where she was kneeling, her head laid over her hands on the table.

"Get up," he said gently, "and sit in that chair. You grieve me by such excessive weeping; your sorrow seems immoderate."

Muriel suffered herself to be lifted up and put in a chair.

"Go away now, dear Uncle Fred," she implored. "I am grateful to you for your attention, but I cannot recover at once. I have placed a great restraint on myself all the morning. I shall be relieved by a good cry."

"I will go away then. Do not ponder too deeply over Mrs. Duerdon's words. She does not mean them, Muriel. Do not cry too much."

"I am not crying about anything *she* said," sobbed Muriel.

Mr. Duerdon looked surprised, but merely said, "That's all right, and left the room.

Mademoiselle came back and found Muriel still crying. She waited patiently for the storm to pass. But there was some time before there was any abatement.

"Mees Muriel, you vex yourself too sore," remarked the governess. "You do well to commence *les études* again."

Mr. Duerdon returned. He had a glass of sherry; this he gave Muriel to take. She made a grimace over it, but managed to gulp it down.

"Excuse Miss Vivian's lessons this morning, Mademoiselle, please; I do not consider she is equal to them. Perhaps you might induce her to lie on the sofa."

"As you think best, Mr. Duerdon," responded Mademoiselle politely, "of course as you think de best. For *moi-même* myself, I think the lessons are the best cure."

"A holiday will be a respite for you both. Muriel, let me see you better the next time we meet. You have nothing to sorrow over, dear child. All shall be put right."

"Dear Uncle Fred," she said gratefully, "it is very good of you having so much patience with me. You will see that Norman is taken care of."

"Certainly—now and always."

CHAPTER XI.

A FULL hour had passed away before Mr. Duerdon came once more that morning to the schoolroom. Muriel was sitting by the fire quiet and inactive. She gave Mr. Duerdon a faint smile.

"You are getting happier now, Muriel."

A slight quiver of the lips.

"Thank you, Uncle Fred, a little better. You will not forget your promise, and look out a suitable home," she implored, "one where Norman will be attended to."

"Nonsense, Muriel, it cannot be. I could not spare you."

"We have money enough to pay for a home now, have we not? Oh, please let us go. We should miss you, kind Uncle Fred, but we should all be happier."

"It is not a question of money, child. I made a promise to your dead mother to always give you both a home here. Can I break it and suffer you both to go away? Do not mention it again. She, Mrs. Duerdon, is all right now. You must make allowance for her peculiar ways. She is older than you, and knows what is correct, you must recollect this. She never saw your mother to love her, and she is no relation to you. You must not be too exacting, Muriel."

"I do not wish to be," sighed the girl, weariedly.

"I always love you and Norman. If you would remember this at times it would make you bear up better."

"I have never forgotten that," answered Muriel, "and it seems to me that I have borne a great deal uncomplainingly."

"Well, Muriel, do all you can to please my wife. Smile at her, be a little more cheerful, and who knows what changes it may effect."

Muriel heaved a deep sigh. The door opened and Owen came running in.

"Muny, will you please take me for a walk," he begged. "Papa come too."

"Cannot, my little fellow, but if Muriel feels equal to it she may take charge of you."

"Will you come too?" asked Muriel, politely of her governess.

"With pleasure," answered Mademoiselle, in a gratified tone.

But this was destined to be a day full of events. A knock came at the door, and in answer to Mr. Duerdon's "Come in," Sarah appeared carrying a small silver salver. She handed it to Mademoiselle with a telegram on.

"Quelle malheureuse," exclaimed Mademoiselle excitedly. She tore it open, read it, and threw it in the fire. "I must see Madame immediately," she said, loudly, "on important business."

And when Muriel and Owen returned from their walk in the park Mademoiselle was gone.

"Only for a few days, Sarah, I suppose."

"I know not, Miss Muriel, Mademoiselle has taken all her boxes with her."

"How could she pack so quickly?" asked Muriel, in surprise.

"Her boxes have been packed some days," answered the schoolroom maid. "I asked Mam'selle if she were going away for holidays, and Mam'selle reproved me for having too much too big curiosity."

"Very strange," replied Muriel.

And it was strange. The hurried departure, the sudden recall; and stranger still was it as time went on, for Mademoiselle never came back. No further word was ever received from her. From that day forth Mademoiselle Loisel was lost to Astley Park.

"So singular," declared Mrs. Duerdon, in a lamenting tone. "She told me she would not say good-bye, only *au revoir*, and then never to come back nor even write."

Many and various were the surmises as to her behaviour, but they were surmises only; no one knew from whence she had come still less where she had gone, and therefore could make no inquiries. No one, not even Mr. Duerdon, was ever enlightened as to her movements. Somebody conjectured that she belonged to some secret band. It might have been so, there was no one to decide the question. Thus, though it was not at first known, Muriel was again deprived of her gover-

ness. The schoolroom looked desolate to Muriel as she entered it after Mademoiselle's departure. An hour ago or so she had been mistress there, now Muriel reigned, but it was reigning in solitude, and that was a kind of sovereignty she did not care for. She took up a book but she could not read, her thoughts were too active. There was a piece of crochet in her work-basket, it had been there many a long day. She got it and tried to work. Somehow she could not, she threw it down in disgust. She glanced at the clock, it was twenty minutes to three. It surely never would get to the time for Norman to come home. Sarah came in with a coal-box of coals, and proceeded to make up the fire. Her rosy face shone as usual.

"I hope you did not get much scolded, Miss Muriel," she said. "Anyway you have not been sent to your room. I'm rare and glad."

Muriel smiled.

"I am always sure of your sympathy, Sarah," she responded quietly. "You forgot to ask me, though, when you were telling me about Mademoiselle's boxes being ready packed"—

"Why so I did, Miss Muriel. I was very excited, I expect."

"Sarah," continued Muriel, coaxingly, "I want you to do a little kindness for me. When you have your tea in the servants' hall at five will you bring Master Norman a cup up? He is not very well, and we must try and tempt his appetite.

Bring him something nice to eat, like we used to have at Dr. Green's."

"That I will with pride, Miss Muriel. Ah, what a lot they used to make of you there," said the girl, with a smile.

"They did," agreed Muriel, quietly.

"I asked Master Norman a bit since if he would like some beef tea or a little hare soup from Mrs. Holmes' room."

"Why where did you see him?" questioned Muriel, startled. "I suppose you mean a day or two ago though perhaps, by a bit since."

"No, that I don't," replied honest Sarah. "I went into Master Norman's bedroom just before I comed in here, and I was startled that awful as I cannot tell you, there was Master Norman a lying on his bed."

"Norman come home!" exclaimed Muriel, jumping up quickly, "what were you about not to tell me quicker?"

"I thought of course, miss, that you knew. Master Norman looked very white and tired, and I supposed he had gone to try and get a sleep, and that you did not wish to disturb him."

"No, indeed," said Muriel, straightening her hair, "he could have had this sofa close to the fire."

"Well, miss, he in general goes off to his bedroom when he comes back from school, no matter how late it is. He likes it, the rest I guess."

Muriel waited to hear no more; she bounded off to his room. She found him lying on his bed pale and weary but awake. He raised himself as she went in.

"Naughty Norman," she said, "why did you not send for me. Have you a half-holiday, Nor?"

A bright smile covered his face as she spoke—

"Welcome, Muriel," he said, "I did not wish you to know I was at home until I was rested. Sarah, I expect, let the cat out of the bag."

"Why should you not want me to know?" asked Muriel, laying her hand gently on Norman's arm. "I could have made you so much more comfortable in the schoolroom."

"Mademoiselle might have objected, Muny. No, love, lately I have always come home pale and fatigued, and I rest a while and get back my colour again."

"You should have told me, Nor. Mademoiselle has had a telegram and gone away."

"Help me down then, Muny, there's a dear Sis. We will go in the schoolroom and have a jolly good fire. Let me lean on your shoulder."

Muriel placed herself as a prop, and with that assistance Norman reached the floor, not without a wry face, though.

"Ugh!" he said, "I wish my ankle would get better. It pains me intolerably. Will you let me come in the schoolroom with this large old slipper? it is soft and roomy. One of the boys brought it to school for me."

"I can forgive anything now I have you," answered Muriel, proudly. "Let me take your arm, it may help you."

Norman slipped his arm lovingly through Muriel's.

"You have not yet told me, Nor, what brought you home so early."

A cloud passed over the boy's intellectual face for an instant, then he laughed and said gaily—

"Ernest's pony, to be sure."

"But how was it you were released so early? Have the masters given you a half-holiday for some special occasion?"

"No" said the boy, sadly, "I was taken ill, Muny, I fainted, actually fainted quite off, and startled all the boys I can assure you. Old Ritchie said I was to come home as soon as I felt well enough, and that I was not to go any more until stronger."

Large tears filled Muriel's eyes.

"Why, Muny, you must not be sorry; we shall have some pleasant days together, and if Mademoiselle will only keep away for a time we shall be jolly."

"I am glad and sorry too," replied Muriel, contending with conflicting emotions. "I am laughing and crying too. For myself it is just as I would wish it; plenty of your society, rest and ease for you. But Norman, I know how disappointed you are. I can enter into that, and I am very sorry for the cause."

"It is all right, Muny, dear. I am content to stay at home for a while," said Norman, gently. "The battle has been too strong for me."

"I broke my promise to you this morning, Nor, I asked Mr. Duerdon to keep you at home. You will forgive me."

"You traitor," said Norman, fondly. "Base little traitor. You must thank Ritchie that I do not scold you. How cosy this room is, Muny. Everything that one could desire, and resting on the sofa in this way stops the pain in my ankle."

"You will have to send for Mr. Shaw, Norman, and let him see it. What did he say about it before?"

"I do not think he thought much about it. He only remarked, 'Ah, it will get better as your health gets stronger.'"

"Perhaps we shall go away together for a change, Nor."

"I would much rather stay at home, Muny. We might go in the summer holidays instead."

Muriel detailed Mrs. Duerdon's anger in the morning, but she passed it over very lightly, unwilling to distress her brother. But never a word said she as to her fears about his health, or of Bennett's words. Her one endeavour was to make Norman comfortable and happy, and she succeeded.

"I do not believe, Muriel we should ever tire of one another's society," he remarked, "if we lived together for one hundred years."

"I am sure we should not," answered Muriel. "Nor for ever."

So truly great was the love between this brother and sister, so pure and endurable their affection.

Tea was brought in, and Owen joined them. Muriel dispensed the honours nicely. After tea Owen went into the drawing-room, but Mrs. Duerdon excused Norman and Muriel's attendance, greatly to their joy.

"We can have some singing," suggested Norman, and they sang together.

Then Norman asked for "I know that my Redeemer liveth," from the *Messiah*. For one minute Muriel's voice became husky, and threatened to master her; the next it rang out sweet and full, as of old. Surely some praise was due to her for the brave mastery she obtained over self; so young and lonely in her sorrow, yet so noble in unselfish endeavours to hide all fear from Norman. If Mrs. Duerdon could have seen and read the young heart aright, would she have thought better and behaved more kindly to the girl? We know not, it is hard to decide; we only relate facts as they were.

Norman did not notice Muriel's emotion, perhaps because he was too much occupied in trying to hide his own. Once or twice he turned round to hastily wipe large tear-drops away. Before he went to bed that night Muriel rang for Sarah, and they had prayers by themselves; then the two helped Norman to his room.

"This has been a wonderful, day full of events,"

remarked Norman, as his sister left him at his bedroom door.

"It has, Nor; the longest I ever remember."

"And not altogether unhappy either, Muny; we have had such an enjoyable evening. What date is it?"

Muriel paused.

"I am not quite sure," she said.

"It's the 10th of February, Miss Muriel; the day our Queen was married, twenty-three years ago."

"Well," said Norman, trying to speak gaily, "I shall never in future forget the anniversary of Queen Victoria's marriage."

"Neither shall I," sighed Muriel, and she never did.

In after-years the recollection of that day stood out clear and distinct in her memory. It was one of time's landmarks; and it was always with mingled feelings of intense sorrow and gladness that she thought of it.

"Good-night, Nor," she said, kissing her brother.

"Good-night, love," returned he. "And now for Blanket fair."

The next morning he breakfasted in bed. It was the first time he had ever done so, but he was glad to do it then. His ankle was very painful again; a large red swelling was rising all round it, and he felt tired and weak besides. Mr. Duerdon sent over to Jycliffe for Mr. Shaw, but he was

away from home, so Mr. Belgrave had to come. It was necessary to have advice from some one.

"You see," observed Mr. Duerdon, "that the pain in the ankle proceeded from no growing pain."

"Aw, aw," replied Mr. Belgrave, with rather less assumption than he had before shown; "these things are puzzling to determine until they arrive at a certain point. Master Vivian must have perfect rest; and now that the gathering can no longer be kept back, it must be constantly poulticed."

"Would change of air be desirable? He and his sister could go."

"Aw, aw, not at all necessary. Better to be here and well nursed."

Shortly after Mr. Belgrave's departure Norman got up. When he was dressed he hopped into the schoolroom, with the aid of Muriel's shoulder. There, with the sofa drawn up to the fire, a large rug to throw over him whenever he desired it, and every comfort around, he and Muriel spent many happy hours. Muriel, with a few lessons from Spence, at her own fervent desire, soon learnt the art of poulticing; and a very tender, patient nurse she made. Mr. Duerdon took care that every attention was paid to them both, and every dainty provided that the weakest and most fanciful appetite could relish.

"What a lucky thing it is that Mademoiselle has

taken her holidays just now," observed Norman one day.

"It seems more than lucky to me," returned Muriel. "It is providential. And had Madam been waiting for any one less beloved than her chère Mademoiselle, I am afraid that their services would have been thrown to the winds, and a fresh governess engaged for me."

"And what should I have done?" wondered Norman. "I should have been very lonely, Muriel."

"I should have been most wretched and miserable," owned his sister. "My lessons, I fear, would have got me into continual disgrace, so preoccupied and restless would have been my mind."

"The boys are very good in coming to see me," remarked Norman presently. "I wonder Mrs. Duerdon lets them come in."

"It is a wonder," agreed Muriel. "But, Norman, I think if I were you I would only admit Alan and Ernest. Much excitement tires you."

"Perhaps it would be as well, Sis, if only the boys will not feel hurt. They can see me when I am about again."

Mr. Duerdon was a frequent visitor to the schoolroom, always kind and considerate. The Vivians were ever pleased to see him, and sorry when he left. Mrs. Duerdon came at times, and was gracious in her manner; but she was not pleased at the turn affairs were taking.

"Norman was getting pampered and trained

into a delicate exotic, whilst Muriel was growing more awkward and gawkish every day," she remarked on one of her calls.

This complimentary speech did not tend to reassure Muriel, and give her confidence. She always appeared to disadvantage in that lady's presence. Another time Mrs. Duerdon said—

"If I do not hear from Mademoiselle shortly, I shall feel in duty bound to take your lessons again."

Muriel shuddered.

"Give her a little longer holiday," pleaded Norman with his brightest smile.

Conquered, yet not liking to own it, Mrs. Duerdon left the room abruptly. So nothing more was said about lessons.

The days passed on, and it was a happy time, unclouded save by the one shadow of Norman's weakness. And this neither of the Vivians suffered to disturb their equanimity; both their fears were allayed. They thought as the pain had gone out of the ankle that he was all right; the weakness and lassitude would in time pass away. Norman's trouble about the exhibition had left him; he even wondered why he had ever battled and fought against circumstances, why he had struggled and rebelled against what had to be. It seemed so strange and such a pity that he had not succumbed sooner, when a year later would do just as well. The bright dreams of ambition that had gilded his future prospects with hopes of honour

and glory were very dim at that period. He could not, try as he would, raise them. Formerly the difficulty was to keep his hopes and aims down —they would soar so high, to such giddy heights; he was going to do so much. Now the one thing he could not do was to think and feel glowing hopes of what his glorious manhood should accomplish. What had brought about the change? Was it his delicate health, or did he go deeper, and know that those dreams could never be realized? Was it because they had been dreams only—dispelled and fled with their mistress sleep, bubbles to burst because filled but with air? Bubbles and dreams, noble and praiseworthy in the store he set on them, yet mere earthly things to be destroyed. He might have some notion of his fading boyhood—it was impossible that he could feel as he did without guessing somewhat of his danger. But if he did, he never betrayed the knowledge. Many a time when left for a few minutes alone, he would sob and cry in very desolation of spirit; it seemed as if there was a sorrow at his heart that must at times have vent. Yet, directly Muriel's footsteps were heard returning, all tears were wiped hastily away, and he greeted her return with a smile. Several times Muriel discovered, on shaking his cushion up, that it was wet as if from recent tears; but she presumed he was grieved at the loss of his studies, and she never remarked on it. So if these tears were proofs of his knowledge of a blighted future they were un-

known and silent witnesses save to himself. No one allusion ever passed his lips as to the grief for which he mourned; no complaint that things were going hard with him. The bright smile never grew less bright; never was the genial frankness, the pleasant winning manner, more apparent. There seemed ever around him, when in others' presence, an atmosphere of peace—a peace which his quiet, brave spirit shed.

One day before February was out Mr. Shaw returned to Jycliffe. Mr. Duerdon sent for him at once. The medical man was shocked to see the great change a few weeks had wrought in the once healthy boy. He said little in the schoolroom, only spoke cheerfully to Norman and asked him a few questions.

"You must be well wrapped up every day, and have a gentle drive in the carriage. You would like that, would you not?"

Norman lifted his face frankly to Mr. Shaw's.

"Very much," he said, "if it would not tire me too much. But I am giving a great deal of trouble now; I do not like to give more."

The medical man was moved.

"Nonsense, Norman," he said; "give them as much as ever you can. They will think all the more of you for it."

Norman smiled a sweet smile.

"They are all too good as it is," he said. "They could not think more of me."

"We could not," put in Mr. Duerdon, laying

his hand on Norman's head. "We all look to you to get him well."

When they had left the room he asked Mr. Shaw his private opinion.

"The boy is very ill," owned Mr. Shaw. "We must try what we can do to bring him round."

"You do not consider there is danger?" questioned Mr. Duerdon anxiously.

"That we can scarcely tell at present," said Mr. Shaw evasively.

After Mr. Shaw's visit, Mrs. Duerdon took to visiting Norman nearly daily. She was shocked to hear that he considered the boy very ill, for to do her credit, she had never really thought there was much the matter. Norman always received her with a quiet smile. Sometimes he held out his hand, thin and fearfully white. She always took it. She grew quite gentle and kind in these days, and Muriel wondered what had effected such a marvellous change. And Muriel herself, what were her feelings? For a time her fears slept; she forgot Bennett's words when continually in Norman's presence. He seemed so happy and so free from pain that she laughed at her former foolish anxiousness. People could not laugh and talk as Norman did if they were going to die. They would stay in bed and be very ill indeed; they would not eat, and the doctors would give them up. Norman was very weak and very tired, but that was from overstudy. He had cried once or twice, she

believed, but that was on account of the horrid exhibition. That trouble even was passing away, or he would speak of it at times. Then how happy they were together, with their reading and singing and conversation. True, she had to do it all, Norman was always too tired; but so had he been before he went to the seaside, the time when Dr. Green said he was growing too fast. Look how soon he had grown strong then! People who were very ill did not have the beautiful colour in their cheeks that Norman had; the bright sparkle always in their eyes, or the pleasant smile that was ever on his face for every one. Muriel continued in this state of blindness for a time, then she was suddenly awakened out of it.

"Muriel," he begged one day, after she had played several pieces for him, "sing to me now, darling. Your voice is most soothing."

She complied with his request, as indeed she always did in every way. In the midst of her singing he fell asleep; she could tell it by his breathing during one of her pauses. This was nothing unusual. She went on singing patiently, fearing to stop lest it might arouse him. Getting tired, however, she looked cautiously round, and was surprised to see his face bathed in perspiration.

"Surely he cannot be too near the fire," she thought, and she got up and walked towards him on tiptoe, intending to place a screen between him and the fire to shield him from its

heat, though the fire was getting low. But before she reached him he started up as if in fright, saying in a loud voice—

"No, no, I cannot go; do not take me, oh, do not take me, please."

Startled and amazed, Muriel was down kneeling at his side in an instant.

"What is the matter, Nor darling?" she asked coaxingly. "Do not be afraid, I am here; Muny is here, you know."

He opened his eyes then, but it was some time before he was thoroughly awake. Trembling in every limb, bathed in perspiration, he clung to her until almost unnerved. She could have cried aloud. As consciousness returned he became more himself again, though his hair hung damp around him, and he was very tired. Muriel got him his strengthening medicine, and after taking it he seemed better. Mr. Duerdon came in; Muriel told him how ill Norman had been.

"A dream," answered Mr. Duerdon, "nothing more. But, Muriel, I think Spence had better bring her sewing and sit here with you; she is very experienced, and knows well what to do in cases of perspiration. You see if Norman took a chill it might prove dangerous."

"Very well, Mr. Duerdon," answered Muriel in a low tone; "perhaps she had better come."

But there was a heavy weight on Muriel's spirits just then. She had received a sudden shock; her eyes had been abruptly opened. She saw

Norman's danger, and she did not seem to know how to bear it. All Bennett's words returned in full force to her mind.

"Will you go and fetch my eau-de-cologne, Muriel?" said Mr. Duerdon.

She was glad of any excuse to leave the room. The girl felt as if her heart must break, how could she bear it all, how hide her sorrow from Norman —her bright beautiful Norman? A few tears must she shed, or her heart would burst, but only a few, or Norman might see she was in trouble, that would never do, he must be deceived and kept in ignorance for a while. Let her dissemble as long as she could. With great self-control after one sharp sudden storm, she dried her eyes resolutely.

"I will leave all grief until bedtime," she said to herself, as she hurried back with the scent bottle.

Outside the schoolroom door stood Mr. Duerdon, leaning his head against the wall.

"Have you left Norman alone?" asked Muriel, almost reproachfully. "Uncle Fred, how could you?"

Mr. Duerdon groaned aloud.

"Hush, child," he said, "do not wonder at me. I am sorely troubled. Norman seems so much worse, that I nearly broke down. Muriel, I am afraid that unless a great change takes place, that he will—will die"—

"I know it," answered Muriel, without emo-

tion. And greatly surprised was she at the cold hard tones she spoke in. It was as if all love and affection had died out of her heart, leaving it as dead and heavy as a stone.

"You—know—it—Muriel?"

"Yes, Mr. Duerdon, I do know it."

"Well, you seem to bear it very well, Muny. You are a brave girl—a wonderful little woman. I wish I could take it so quietly. I wonder what Mr. Mervin thinks about him."

"That I do not know," answered Muriel, "I always leave them alone. Perhaps Norman may appear his best before Mr. Mervin. You can easily ask his opinion."

"Shaw and Belgrave will not speak out as they ought, I cannot understand their hesitation," mused Mr. Duerdon.

"Uncle Fred, let me go in the schoolroom. Will you go in too?"

"No, I will send for the Vicar, and if he considers our beautiful boy is in danger, he must tell him. Suppose he should die—how cruel, how very cruel it would be to let him go unprepared."

"Oh, don't do that, don't tell him," pleaded Muriel, the tears coursing each other in quick succession down her cheeks. "Please don't, it would kill him—the shock I mean."

"I wish Dr. Green was alive," groaned Mr. Duerdon, "he understood Norman's constitution, perhaps he could have saved him."

"How I wish he were," echoed Muriel, clasp-

ing her hands together in the fervency of her emotion. "Who knows, Uncle Fred, but he may get better as it is."

"God grant it, Muriel," replied Mr. Duerdon, reverently. "Keep up a brave heart."

"I will try," she answered, and went on into the schoolroom.

Norman was sitting up bandaging his foot. Muriel flew to him, and kneeling down, gently bound the soft linen binder round and round. He kissed her forehead as she knelt, and then asked her to give him her arm round the room. Twice or thrice from end to end they went, Norman hopping all the time on his sound foot. It was tiring work for him, and he stood for a few seconds in the large bow window looking out.

"Did I startle you, this afternoon, Muny," he said, "I had such a strange dream, it quite frightened me. It was I expect a kind of nightmare. I felt bound down."

"Was it dear," replied his sister, soothingly. "You have quite forgotten it now, I hope."

"Forgotten its effects, yes," he answered, dreamily, "but not the strange dream, I could not tell it you yet, you must wait until I—I get—get stronger."

He jerked out the last words lingeringly, and then he seemed lost in thought. Muriel did not care to rouse him. Presently he went on—

"Aye, Muriel, how delightful it would be to go

out again. One look at the green fields, or one breath of air from the salt sea, and I should be satisfied."

"I wish we could get you to the sea," replied Muriel, with strong feeling, "but the doctors will not let you go. Mr. Shaw has even forbidden the drives lately. Do you miss them so very much?"

"I do, Muny. I long for fresh air, just one breath would make me feel better. But I do not care for the close carriage, it is only a moving room. I want the open air and sunshine."

"I will ask for you, Nor."

Norman clasped his hands together, the prospect of such an outing was ecstasy to him. But when she went to ask Mr. Duerdon, that gentleman only shook his head.

"We must ask Mr. Shaw," he said.

"What matter what he says," asked Muriel, in reckless unselfishness. "If dear Nor has to die, why not let him do what he likes."

"While there is life, there is hope," answered Mr. Duerdon, uttering the well-worn and misused expression.

And Norman never afterwards got a drive in an open carriage. Mr. Shaw declared it would be decidedly unsafe, and Muriel had to give way. He went out in the large carriage, muffled up to the throat. But every one who loves fresh air knows what the feeling is to drive out with every breath of breeze even kept carefully from them. Norman

begged to have one window opened, if only for a minute, but Spence who accompanied the Vivians, in her anxiety to do what was right, would not hear of it. Muriel even suffered from the pent-up stifling they endured, but she supposed both Mr. Shaw and Spence understood what was best, and tried to bear it for her brother's sake. Norman returned home, decidedly the worse for his drive, instead of being better, he was worse. And so the days passed on with but little variation, save the visits of Mr. Shaw and Mr. Mervin, and occasional calls from Alan Murray and Ernest. Norman was ever pleased to see gentlemanly Alan, and many nice conversations had they, Muriel always being present.

"I wish Muriel your brother could get better," Alan remarked one day.

"So do I most earnestly," replied Muriel, with wistful eyes fixed anxiously on the clear sky.

"Why do you not get him moved into a more cheerful room than this?" asked Alan.

"Oh, Alan, this room is the nicest in the house, is it not, Nor?"

"The nicest to us, Murry, the pleasant times we have spent in it would invest even a prison cell with a charm."

"Astley Park must be full of gloomy rooms," returned Alan, "if this is the brightest specimen."

"We like it best," said Norman, quietly, "and so would you Alan if you lived here."

"Are you going out next Thursday?" asked Alan, presently. "The Prince of Wales is going to be married, and there are to be famous rejoicings."

"They will scarcely extend here," answered Norman. "Besides I should not be allowed to go."

"The public rejoicings are to be universal. Astley is going to outshine itself. There will not be a corner in England that will not put on holiday attire. Norman, if you would care to go, I will ask Mr. Shaw and Mr. Duerdon myself. Why my mother would send her own carriage and horses sooner than that you should be disappointed."

"Thank you, Alan," said Norman, squeezing his friend's hand. "There would be no need for that, Mr. Duerdon would let the carriage go, but I do not care to go, I am not well enough."

And there the subject ended for a time. But every one who visited the gentle boy was full of excitement about the coming events, until at last he felt moved by a strong desire to participate in the stir and enjoyment. He saw the *Illustrated News*. The pictures and views of the gracious Princess Alexandra, and of her landing and reception in England, the grand arches and triumphal procession through London, with its gigantic crowds of people who flocked from all parts of England to see the fair young creature. And he read of how she had made way with her own sweet face into the hearts of all. People

had been prepared to honour and welcome the bride of the Prince of Wales for his sake, but most ended by loving her for her own. The great metropolis swelled with pride and delight when she came, and so greatly was the nation moved by its throes that every place determined to try and celebrate the marriage. Astley was in no whit willing to be left behind. Dinner for the men, tea for the women and children. Entertainments afterwards in the village schoolroom in the shape of concert, reading, and recitation, were among the minor movements. Fireworks were to be sent off in the evening, dancing and amusement of all kinds. For a few days about this time Norman seemed to get better.

On the Tuesday before the royal marriage Martha called to see him, she brought him a sponge cake made by her own deft hands. And it may be here mentioned that the gifts the invalid boy got were so numerous—apples, oranges, gingerbread, and the numberless little things that poor people could afford, that Mr. Duerdon resented the frequent invasion of donors into the Park. Orders were given that all persons should be told that Master Vivian had everything he could desire, but that if they still wished to leave presents, they must be left at the lodge. This of course did not please those who were anxious to get nearer, in hopes of seeing a glimpse of Norman's bright and much-loved face, so the number of small parcels became considerably lessened.

Martha from her long service at Dr. Green's considered herself privileged, and without permission walked straight to the house. Norman was pleased to see her, although she was shocked to see him.

"My eyes, Master Norman, you look worse since the doctor died."

The ready tears came into the boy's eyes.

"I have been ill for a long time now, Martha," he said. "I am sure to look much changed. Is John quite well?"

"Yes, thank you, sir, he sent his best respects, and both he and Bennett said as I was to tell you that if ever you want a strong arm theirs is ready."

"They are very kind," smiled Norman, much pleased at their thoughtfulness.

"Are you going to see the ferstivities, Master Norman?" inquired Martha, full of them.

"I scarcely know yet. Every one talks so much about them, that I should like to go."

"We're a going—John and I. Thursday is in general my baking day, but when I was told that our king were a goin' to be wed, I said 'John I suppose we mun be like other folk and take a holiday.'"

Both Norman and Muriel laughed at this.

"It is not our king who is going to be married," explained Norman. "But he will be king some time if he lives long enough. His mother is our most gracious Queen."

Owen ran into the room.

"What a purty boy," exclaimed Martha. "Will you come and speak to me, my dear."

But Owen was not to be persuaded; with a serious shake of his head he went and stood by Norman.

Shortly after Alan and Ernest came in, and Martha with many curtsies took her leave.

"Norman, I have arranged it all for you," said Alan. "Mamma is sending a bath chair over, and "—

"And papa is going to see that it is put in a good place," interrupted Ernest.

"Yes, and Mr. Duerdon has promised to let you go," said Muriel, eagerly. "I shall be with you all the time."

"And we shall not be far off," said Ernest.

"You are all very kind," replied Norman. "I shall be glad to go."

"Why, Norman, you are never crying," remarked Alan, hastily. "Cheer up old man, you will soon be better."

For all answer Norman turned his head towards the sofa, and burst out crying, whilst Alan and Ernest stood at his side in great distress. But Muriel went up to him, and putting Owen a little farther off, placed her hand on his head. The action roused him.

"I am very wicked," he said. "Owen come and scold your naughty brother."

Owen went and kissed Norman.

"Good Nor," he said. "I love Nor."

"So do we all, Owen," remarked Alan.

"I think Norman is tired now," observed Muriel, timidly.

"Ah, Miss Muriel, and you want us to go," laughed Alan, gaily.

She nodded her head in acquiescence. She stood at the head of the sofa, and Norman did not see her.

"No, Alan, you and Ernest must both stay to tea. Ernest shall read to me, Alan will show some pretty pictures to Owen and explain them, and Muriel shall sing for us all."

"Very well," agreed Muriel, "so long as you promise to rest we will all do as you wish."

CHAPTER XII.

At last the long-talked-of day arrived. It was ushered in by the ringing and pealing of the church bells, which went at intervals all day long. Flags were flying in every direction, several were even displayed from Astley Park. Triumphal arches were put up in every available place. Brass bands sounded, and great was the din and commotion. From early morning Norman appeared bright and cheerful; slightly excited, but not more so than was compatible with the occasion. All day long he was kept as quiet as it was possible to keep him, but we all know how difficult it is to remain inactive when the sounds of bells and music stir, and rushing feet all render us alive to what is going on around, and we long to be with the bustling crowd. Norman was strangely anxious to get out, and it taxed all Muriel's control to curb her own wishes and amuse him. At last the hour arrived when the large carriage was waiting at the hall door, and Parkyn stood in the schoolroom ready to help the now fragile boy downstairs.

"You will be wrapped up in the rug, sir, I suppose, when you get into the carriage?"

"Yes, Parkyn, if it is cold enough."

"Will you take my arm, Master Norman?"

"Could you not carry him, Parkyn?" suggested Muriel. "I think my brother would like it. You will be very careful of him."

"That I will, Miss. Put your arms well round my neck, sir."

Mrs. Duerdon coming in at the door gave quite a little horrified scream at the sight, but Norman said, "I am all right, thank you," and she did not say anything more.

"Go slowly, please, Parkyn," he entreated, as they began to descend the stairs.

"You need feel no fears," answered the man, reassuringly. "You are as safe as if you were on the sofa, sir."

All the servants, from the highest to the lowest, some ready in their outdoor things, were congregated together to see Norman start, and the boy, ever sensitive and observant, might at any other time have wondered at it, but he was too full of excitement to pay particular attention. He saw many faces, and he smiled at them as was his wont, but he little thought how each had striven to be present and watch this going out perhaps for the last time. Muriel observed all, and it bore a strange significance to her. It was no light thing she knew which kept some of those servants in from the outdoor sports and gaieties. She never said anything, however, until Norman was lifted in the carriage and placed comfortably there. Then she said as cheerfully as she could—

"Wave your handkerchief, Nor, darling, to the servants, they are all so pleased to see you again. Look, Mrs. Holmes is bowing to you."

Norman leant forward and raised his hat. If he had wished to do honour to the highest in the land he could not have done it more gallantly. Then he raised his hands to his lips and sent them a kiss.

"God bless you, Master Norman!" was shouted to him from all sides as the carriage bowled off.

"Aye, may God bless him!" acquiesced the housekeeper, "for he will soon be shining as one of the stars in heaven. Good gracious what a smile he's got, I never saw anything like it, it quite runs through a body's heart."

Mr. Duerdon was waiting at the schoolroom with one of his men and the bath chair when Norman arrived.

"Lift him out carefully, Thomas," directed Mr. Duerdon.

"I will, master. Tell me if you are not comfortable, sir."

It was lucky the road from the school gates to the school was not far, for at each step the breath nearly went out of Norman's body. It had been arranged that he should be wheeled up to the top end of the room near the platform, so after the difficulty of coaxing the bath chair through the doorway was accomplished, they placed him there. A small space had been purposely left by Mr. Mervin's directions, and a chair placed near for

Muriel. The room, save for forms and tables was empty when the Vivians took their place.

Mr. Duerdon came up. "You look quite bright, Norman," he remarked. "Have you everything as you like it?"

The boy smiled gratefully at his guardian—"I am most comfortable," he replied.

"Then I wonder whether you would think it very wrong of me to leave you?" pursued Mr. Duerdon. "These entertainments are not much in my line, and there are plenty to look after you. I leave you in good hands."

"Yes," said Muriel, quickly, "Alan, and Ernest, and Mr. Mervin."

"And a lot more, Uncle Fred," put in Norman; "every one knows me here."

"I am afraid Alan Murray is not coming," rejoined Mr. Duerdon. "I heard some one say he was prevented owing to some death in the family."

"Well, we can manage well enough," said Muriel. In her unselfishness she was anxious to release Mr. Duerdon. "Martha's husband and Thomas can wheel Norman out at any time."

So Mr. Duerdon left, and Norman looked unusually bright. "How quiet it is here," he remarked.

The words had scarcely left his lips when the noisy, boisterous troop of scholars came shouting and bustling in. Such a scramble for seats, such a rush for the best places. Teachers vainly en-

deavoured to preserve order and quiet. Parents were all looking after their children with a partiality that had something of the ludicrous in it. The noise at first startled Norman, but after he grew accustomed to it he was amused so long as they kept away from his bath chair. He soon got wearied, and was glad to see that when Mr. Mervin entered the room the people rose *en masse* and perfect silence ensued. Mr. Mervin gave out the grace and then the stillness was again broken. They sang, and the noise was deafening. We say noise advisedly, for no other word would describe it. There was one merit it possessed—though loud and shrill it was hearty. Norman was accustomed to these public teas, he had often been to the Christmas and Easter parties, but Muriel had hitherto always stayed at home, Mrs. Duerdon not considering them select enough for any young lady. She was slightly upset by the singing, and wondered how Norman stood it so well. Soon the clatter of cups and saucers began as tea was handed down. Mrs. Mervin sat at the head table close to the Vivians, and she saw that they were well attended to. But instead of tea Muriel gave Norman a little weak brandy and water that Mr. Duerdon had left for him in a flask, and it refreshed him wonderfully.

"Look what a grand tea they have, Muny," he remarked.

"I am perfectly astonished," confessed Muriel.

And well might she be. There were cakes of all kinds, biscuits, preserves, tartlets, cheesecakes, and ham and tongue sandwiches.

"A prince does not get married every day, Muny," said her brother.

"Certainly not, and this is *the* prince," she said, "the eldest son. They do not often marry the heir apparent, or get him married, whichever is correct. England is right to make a stir."

"You may say Great Britain," corrected Norman, nibbling away at a sweet biscuit, but it was a poor pretence at eating, and deluded no one. Tea was nearly over before he noticed the people staring at him with pitying eyes.

"They have finished eating," replied Muriel, in answer to his looks, "and are looking at your bath chair."

"But their eyes are full of wonder," said poor Norman, and the sensitive face flushed crimson.

"I will stand before you," said Muriel, "how rude it is of them to gaze so openly."

"They do not mean it, Muny, it is their way."

"A very bad one," she said, not overwell pleased.

But looks were not the worst thing they had to endure. Loud whispers, loud enough for Norman to hear, were going on around. "How bad he looks." "He'll not last long," and similar speeches.

Muriel blushed in very shame and torture at the want of refinement which she was surprised to find so great amongst them.

Mrs. Mervin came to the rescue.

"Hush, good people," she said, "Master Vivian can hear, you must speak lower."

One man said, "Bless him, there's not one on us as would wish to hurt him."

"I know it," replied Mrs. Mervin. "You did it thoughtlessly; such behaviour is torture to him and his sister."

There was silence after this, and Muriel guessed whom they had to thank; she had seen Mrs. Mervin speaking quietly, though she had not caught the words.

"I wonder where Ernest is?" questioned Norman.

"I fancy he is with his class, Nor, he will come when he can get"—

Mrs. Mervin came up to speak to Norman—"You can run away for a little while if you like," she said to Muriel.

"No thank you, Mrs. Mervin," replied the girl, "I would rather sit here."

"How are you feeling now, my dear boy?" asked the motherly woman of the bright boy whom she admired so much.

"Pretty well, thank you," he replied.

"I am afraid you will be very tired before the evening is over," she remarked. "Would you like to escape now before the entertainment begins?"

Norman paused a minute; the temptation to him to go was great, but he thought of Muriel—she had so little pleasure.

"No thank you, I will stay," he answered, quietly.

"We can have the carriage fetched at once," said Muriel, "if you would like to go."

"Not at present," he said again.

"I must see about the tables being moved," said Mrs. Mervin. "No one seems to know what to do. Good-bye for a while, Norman," and she stooped and kissed the gentle boy on his forehead. It was with sad thoughts she carried the remembrance of his faded looks about with her. Tears came to her eyes as she thought of the beautiful bright face so altered; not altered either in beauty or brightness, but oh, so sharp and thin. She saw he was going to a better home. Any one would indeed be blind not to notice it now.

"I do not know but what it is best for him," pondered the good lady, regretfully. "This is a world of sorrow. Heaven is a place of love. Poor Muriel, it will be sad for her."

So musing Mrs. Mervin turned and came back, she could not help herself, so grieved did she feel; but there was no shadow of grief on her face as she took the boy's two thin hands within her own and clasped them tight.

"Norman," she said, gently, "heaven is a beautiful home."

The boy smiled at her, such a radiant, glowing smile.

"I know it, Mrs. Mervin," he replied, rapturously. "Oh, I know it."

"Thank God!" was all her reply. She squeezed

his hand and left him. He understood her. Muriel glanced at him. She too took in the whole meaning. Norman's head was bent on his clasped hands—he was breathing a prayer.

Tables were cleared away, hustled into the class-rooms, and forms ranged one on another (save those that were used) in an incredibly short space of time. Doors were opened, and grown-up people dressed in their holiday best poured in, on the payment of sixpence each, to the entertainment.

And now began Norman's real difficulties. Every one wanted to speak to him; they crowded round him, shook hands, all spoke together in warmest tones of commiseration. In vain Muriel strove to answer for him to place herself in their way. It was Master Norman they wanted—Master Norman they'd have. It was kindly meant sympathy, but very mistaken. The gentle face flushed in dismay, the large grey eyes, so bright and clear, dimmed with tears, and with a great unspoken entreaty, as if he would have implored them to desist. One instant more and Muriel must have spoken out, but help came, and the space in front of the bath chair was cleared. It was Ernest who elbowed his way up.

"How could you all be so unkind," he said, reproachfully to the villagers, whom he knew so well. "Make way and give Master Vivian some air. See, he is almost fainting."

No second reproof was needed, they dispersed as if by magic.

"What a delightful change you effected," said Muriel. "I was in agony for Norman."

"I wish I had come sooner, Muriel, but I knew that our poor, though ignorant, are not unkindly intentioned. Their mistake arose through thoughtlessness. But the result is unfortunately the same."

It was some minutes before Norman in any way recovered. And it was not ordered that he should spend the rest of the evening comfortably. It was not until after the entertainment began however that they realized this, then to their dismay they found that the bath chair was placed in the very worst position in the whole room. Far better had it even been by the door, where the people crowded in, for then at any rate it could have been wheeled out. Every one going on and off the platform had to almost jump on to the chair, and poor Norman was in an agony for his foot. There was no remedy for it. He could not suffer any one to sit on his feet, neither could the chair be moved away, it was perfectly wedged in. And to be wheeled down the room was simply impossible, for forms filled with people went close up to the wall. Norman was in a torture of fear, pale and trembling, not only when each movement gave him cause to fear, but even whilst the singing was going on, dreading with unspeakable dismay the next rush. If it had been his hand that he minded, he could have shielded it, but he had no power to guard his foot. It was some time before

Muriel discovered the terror the boy was in. Norman revealed it, unintentionally then, by his shrinking shivering manner. Muriel was likewise much afraid, when she saw their dilemma, and her powerlessness to protect. It was no good telling people to be careful, they were in far too great a state of excitement to hear fall, less to heed any voice on the subject.

"What can be done?" uttered Muriel, in dismay. "I think Nor the best thing would be to go home."

"There is no chance of that," answered the boy. "The only thing is to endure as bravely as one can. Do not spoil your evening, Muny love, with fears for me."

Mrs. Mervin who sat in the front seat saw the unhappy look of both the Vivian's. She got up to inquire into the cause.

Muriel explained.

"I wish the bath chair could be turned round. The only plan I can think of is for you to leave."

"But how? we cannot move the chair at all. The people would have to get up or else have the platform moved."

"There is another way, Muriel. Let Thomas run home and order the carriage. Ernest shall tell him—he is near the door. Two of the men can carry him out easily."

She beckoned Ernest.

"Thomas could carry him without assistance," answered Muriel, "it is a capital plan."

"How could he carry me?" asked Norman, impatiently for him, "he would have to jump over each form."

"No," said Ernest, who had joined them, and caught part of the whispered colloquy. "He could go down the middle of the room. The space is there."

But Norman shrank from this.

"It would be so public," he said. "Every one would be gazing at and pitying me."

"Not more so than they have already done, dear boy," remarked Mrs. Mervin, significantly.

Norman was not to be persuaded.

"I would rather stay," he kept saying.

And Muriel who understood the shrinking sensitiveness of his disposition joined in with him.

"Well, there is one more way out of the dilemma. I will speak to papa."

Mr. Mervin came quietly in answer to her summons.

"George," she said, "poor Norman is most awkwardly placed," and she explained the position.

"Yes, my dear," he answered, wonderingly.

"Well, you must have a chair placed at the other end, I would not have Norman's ankle touched for worlds. The agony he has already suffered in dreaded kicks must have been fearful."

"It shall be attended to, Fanny," he said, pushing his spectacles on to his forehead and looking about.

"Are you looking for Reade?"

"Yes; ah, there he is, he manages the affair. In courtesy I must get him to effect the change. Ah, Norman, and how are you?" he asked, kindly, "you look very bright. I trust you will not suffer for coming."

Norman shook his head, he did not speak, and the Mervins walked away quietly again. But one very good change resulted from the whispered colloquy. A chair was placed at the other end of the platform, and Norman was left in peace.

During one short pause in the singing Thomas forced his way up to his young master.

"We've been and made a rare mistake, sir, in placing your chair here," observed the man, respectfully. "I wish I could knock a hole through the wall and get you out."

"I am all right now, Thomas, thank you. But I shall be glad when the entertainment is over. My back and head ache."

"Now, do they, Master Norman? I'll ask Mr. Mervin to stop the proceedings. They've had enoo for their money, I'se warrant."

"They would scarcely think so. No, I will wait until the end now," said Norman, with a smile.

Muriel looked wistfully at her brother.

"We like our dear schoolroom at home well," she said. "But Nor, love, I think we shall value it a thousand times more after to-night."

"That we shall, Muny, only let us once get back, and I for one will not leave it until I am better."

Shortly after this Muriel saw Mr. Mervin in earnest conversation with Mr. Reade, the schoolmaster. The latter was looking down as if not well pleased. Muriel wondered whether it was something to do with the platform, because Mr. Mervin kept looking towards it. Was there something wrong in the chair being placed at the other end? Her doubts were soon set at rest. Mr. Reade got up and in a very nervous voice told the audience that they were about to bring the entertainment to a close. The programme had been unusually lengthy, and owing to the numerous encores, gratifying and pleasing as they were, they would be unable to finish it out. A few speeches would be made, and after that "God save the Queen" would be sung. People could then quietly disperse.

"Very kind of Mr. Mervin," remarked Muriel to Mrs. Mervin, as the people were filing out.

"We are all tired, Muriel," said Mrs. Mervin, significantly. "One great drawback to these entertainments is every one's desire to sing, whether they have a voice or not. If John Jones's daughter takes a part, why should not Richard Evan's son be asked to help. There is great jealousy."

Thomas came up.

"The room is sufficiently cleared now, sir, for you to go. Shall I wheel you straight off."

"Is the carriage here?"

"It is," answered Ernest, running up. "Give me a ride as far as the lodge gates, will you?"

Norman nodded assent. The clock struck ten.

"You can start now, Thomas," said Muriel, after a warm good-night had been said to the Mervins.

The forms were being rapidly stowed away as Thomas wheeled the chair slowly through the schoolroom. A number of men stood near the door; too many for Norman with tear-dimmed eyes to note one.

"Good-night, Master Norman. God bless you, sir," echoed on all sides.

"Good-night, my men," he said, then added, "and good-bye."

A voice from the crowd, though no one seemed to know whose, said, "Three cheers for Master Norman!"

"And my sister," put in Norman, quickly.

"Aye, three loud cheers for Miss Vivian and Master Norman, the loudest you can give."

A deafening shout rent the air. It was quickly caught up by those outside. They perhaps did not know for whom it was, but they joined in with might and main.

"Thank you all very much," said the boy. "I am glad they did that, Muriel," said Norman, as they drove off. "They do not think less of me because I am so useless."

"They think a lot more," answered Ernest,

warmly. "Why where I sat it was nice to hear the people speaking so lovingly of you. It is a great thing to be loved by every one as you are, Norman."

"It shows me one thing," rejoined Muriel, "if the Astley people are ignorant and unmannerly and dense, they are not to be blamed for it. Their hearts are right, it is only their want of education that blunts them."

"Muny love, what a speech," answered Norman. "I love Astley and the Astley people. There is not another village in all England half as nice."

"Master Norman you are very patriotic," said Ernest, as the carriage stopped to let him down. "Take care you do not get bigoted."

Norman squeezed Ernest's hand in answer. "Good-night, Ernie," he said.

CHAPTER XIII.

NORMAN seemed no worse for his visit to the village school, and his long evening there. If anything, he appeared better. The weather took up, and for a few days he went out regularly in the bath chair. Douglas wheeled him, always on the soft grass so as not to shake him. Muriel walked by his side. Very happy days were those to Muriel. She quite allowed herself to think that Norman was getting better. What should she know about these deceptive improvements. Mr. Duerdon suggested that Sultan should be harnessed and put in the bath chair, but Mr. Shaw said that would be very unsafe. A man—staid and trustworthy—was best. Norman loved his bath chair.

"I think I am growing a little boy again," he said; "don't you remember, Muny, I used to say, 'I love the tabul, I love the chairs, the boo-boos and everything.'"

"Yes," laughed Muriel.

"Well, dear, I love this chair now."

"We must not forget to tell Alan when he comes next time," said Muriel. "Mrs. Murray will be pleased to hear it is appreciated."

"I wonder why they did not let Sultan draw me," questioned Norman.

"Perhaps he would not have gone quietly enough."

"Muriel, treason. Sultan has the sense of a human being. I should like him to be Owen's, or else belong to little children, he is so very safe."

"He cannot belong to any one else, he is yours," replied Muriel, with strange blindness.

A startled glance from Norman, a slight gulping in the throat. Then he spoke again—

"Muriel, I should like to see Sultan. Should we go there."

"I will ask Douglas."

"Better not go off the grass, Master Norman. I will bring Sultan to you before you go out to-morrow," said the man, when appealed to.

"Bring him upstairs, Douglas," asked Norman, with a faint attempt at a joke.

Douglas took the question in earnest.

"Oh, no, sir, I did not mean that. I will bring him when you are in your bath chair ready to start."

And when, the next day Sultan was led up for Norman to stroke, it was wonderful to watch the intelligence of the faithful animal—so sagacious and proud. As Norman remarked he did everything but talk. Evidently he remembered his young master well. He pawed the ground and whinnied playfully. Norman spoke to him as if he were some human being who could understand.

"He is more clever than any one gives him credit for," explained the boy.

The change in Norman, the apparent improvement continued for nearly a fortnight. All that time he went out daily. Mr. Duerdon began to think he had been over-anxious, ready to meet grief half-way, and blamed himself for being so eager to cross the bridge. Mr. Shaw had been wise wiser than he, Mr. Duerdon, had given him credit for. One day Mr. Belgrave called in. He was still kept on. He entered the schoolroom briskly not to say noisily. Norman had been dozing, but he opened his eyes.

"You have been a cheat," said the new practitioner, "aw, aw, a regular cheat and a—a delusion."

"I think not," was Norman's grave reply.

"You will soon be running about again, brisker than ever; why I think you could walk now if you tried."

Muriel looked delighted.

"Nor," she said, "how delightful it will be. You can have the green fields and the fresh air all day long then."

"Get up now and oblige me by trying to walk, aw, it is a fearful thing to get too indolent."

"I am not able to stand even, Mr. Belgrave. I tried this morning," answered Norman, quietly.

"Try now again. I wish it, aw, you will forget how to walk."

"I think," put in Mrs. Duerdon, who stood by Norman's sofa, "that there is a lot in what Mr. Belgrave remarks. Norman do try."

Norman moved as if about to comply, then fell back again.

"It is no good," he said, "I cannot walk."

"You give up very easily, Norman. I would have given you credit for more spirit," observed Mrs. Duerdon, in displeasure.

"Lie still, my boy," said Mr. Duerdon, coming to the rescue. "Do not ask him to try again. All in good time. I have great faith in Norman."

"He is improving so fast," said Mr. Belgrave, "that I shall soon give up calling. My visits will not be needed."

Norman lifted his large truthful eyes to the surgeon's face. They were full of reproach, wonder, astonishment.

Mr. Belgrave coloured awkwardly.

"I meant it," he said.

"I—think—not." Then in whispered tones, Norman said, "Perhaps he is not to blame; he does not understand my constitution."

Muriel caught the whisper, saw the expression on her brother's face, and knew that Norman—not Mr. Belgrave—was right.

Shortly after the surgeon's departure, Mr. Shaw called.

"I know that Belgrave has been; it is very convenient his being able to look in daily, and

saves me the drive, but I want to see the boy for myself."

"You shall, Shaw; I want your frank opinion."

Norman was dozing off again, but opened his eyes quietly as Mr. Shaw felt his pulse.

"I did not startle you, Norman."

"Oh, no, thank you, Mr. Shaw, you were very gentle."

"Can you keep awake for a few minutes, my boy?"

"I will try," answered Norman, with a sweet smile, "but I feel very sleepy."

"Now, Miss Muriel, brush your brother's hair back; there, he will not go to sleep now. He likes you to be near him."

"And I could not be parted from Norman," replied Muriel.

It was good to see the affectionate look that passed from brother to sister.

"Have you been out in your bath chair to-day?" inquired Mr. Shaw.

Norman shook his head.

"No, I was too tired."

"Yes, I am sure you were; you feel very weak."

"Dreadfully so," panted the boy. "I almost seem as if I cannot get my breath at times. It is too much difficulty. Mr. Belgrave wanted me"—

"Mr. Belgrave wanted my brother to try and walk," put in Muriel. "He thought he could if he would try."

"Impossible," muttered Mr. Shaw.

"It is true," confirmed Mr. Duerdon; "he was very persistent in his assertion, even hinted that Norman was indolent."

"The man must be a simpleton," declared Mr. Shaw angrily. "More than a simpleton—a fool. Good-bye, Norman. Sleep as much as you can."

Norman did not reply, but he took the hand extended, and pressed it warmly between his own. It was answer sufficient.

"I cannot understand Belgrave at all," observed Mr. Shaw as he stood in the hall. "Norman's is, unfortunately, too common a sickness to need much discernment."

"You do not consider he is any better then?"

Mr. Shaw shook his head.

"Why," declared Mr. Duerdon, "what is one to think? Belgrave said he would soon be all right again."

"Duerdon, pardon me, you would know the worst."

"I would, I would."

"Norman Vivian is no better, and he never will be. His days in this world are numbered."

Mr. Duerdon's head went down; he seemed aged years in a few seconds.

"And the cause of his death, Shaw?"

"Consumption, or rather, I should say, atrophy. Is it inherited from either of his parents?"

"His mother, I think, died from it. Oh, Shaw, can you not save him?"

"I cannot; no human power can save the boy now."

"Would not going to a warmer climate be efficacious? Think what a bright, beautiful boy he is. Look at those lovely eyes of his, his intellect, his winning manners. Oh, Shaw, can nothing be done?"

"Nothing; but be comforted, Duerdon—if you can find any comfort in it—Norman will in all probability pass painlessly away. I am sorry I told you, but I want some one to prepare his sister."

"Ah, Muriel," groaned Mr. Duerdon.

"Talk about earnest eyes that read one's very thoughts through," said Mr. Shaw, "why I never saw anything like hers, and her devotion to him is touching. I dread to think how she will bear it."

"You need not, she is very brave, she was prepared for it a short time ago."

"You astonish me. But I tell you, Duerdon, how it is. She forgets herself at present in her care and thought of Norman. She will be crushed almost to death by the blow when she realizes it. But I must be off. Other patients"—

"One more question before you leave. Had Norman's ankle anything to do with his—his death?"

A pause.

"You ask me a difficult question. The pain and then the gathering may have helped to accelerate the disease, for they were very weaken-

ing. But he must have been in a very poor state of health at the time, or they would not have mattered much. He was predisposed, you see, to atrophy. I will call to-morrow. I cannot do anything, but a visit from the medical attendant is satisfactory in these cases."

Mr. Shaw kept his word. Spence was sitting alone with Norman when he called.

"Muriel has had to do some writing for Mrs. Duerdon," said Norman as Mr. Shaw sat down by his side.

The boy's hectic cheeks and bright eyes made him look very beautiful. They might have deceived some people. Mr. Shaw read them too surely; the sunken cheek, the sharp outlines, were all clear to him. He saw at a glance that the disease was making rapid strides. The boy was fading away surely and fast.

"No pain now?" questioned the experienced practitioner.

"It has all gone," replied Norman wearily, "but I am tired, so weary and tired. I do not know whether I would not really rather have the pain."

"Ah, but, Norman, you know who will help you to bear it all."

"I do," was the gentle reply. "God will. Mr. Mervin often prays by me, and it has been such a comfort."

"You would not stay, Norman?"

"Oh, no, not now, Mr. Shaw, I could not, I have drawn so near. I would rather go."

"But suppose, Norman, I was to say that your time had not come yet, suppose I declared that you could live."

Norman raised himself on the sofa in very excitement.

"Do you think I shall get better?" he asked, his eyes all aglow. "Muny would be pleased. But no, I would rather—die," and he sank back again.

"My gentle boy, I am glad to hear you say so. God always does what is best."

There was a pause. Mr. Shaw thought Norman was going to sleep. He stooped down and with one hand pushed the hair back off the broad, white forehead pure as the purest alabaster.

"Good-bye, dear boy," he said, and he let his lips rest in one long kiss.

Norman looked up surprised.

"I did not think you would have done that, Mr. Shaw," he exclaimed. "I thought you cold, and hard, and unfeeling. I blamed you very much in your treatment of Dr. Green."

"You were not alone in that, Norman, I received universal blame. I do not think it was deserved, my boy, I did all, as I thought, for the best. Sometimes it happens that people are placed in a difficult position. Two paths equally clear lie before them, which to choose they cannot

decide—each seem right, or both appear wrong. This was my dilemma with Dr. Green—his wish, or my own. I gave way to his, and you know the consequence."

"I believe now most firmly that you did right," approved Norman. "I did not know you were actuated by any principle or desire to do right. I only thought you displayed a callous indifference."

"Aye, there was the mistake. But here is your sister. Well, Miss Muriel, I will let you take my place."

"Is Norman better?" she asked timidly, as she extended her hand.

"No, Miss Vivian. You must see that he sleeps when he likes."

Mr. Duerdon met Mr. Shaw on his way downstairs.

"Have you a few minutes to spare?" he asked.

Mr. Shaw took out his watch.

"A few, if for anything important."

"I want you to tell my wife. Not that she cares particularly for the Vivians; that is, not in the way I do, you understand, but still I think she will be very shocked."

"Oh, excuse me, Duerdon, that is a thing you would do best. Mrs. Duerdon might resent my interference, might not believe me in fact."

"That is just what she would do. The words from you would have weight, whereas she ignores all I say, ascribing it to over anxiety and love."

"In that case I will accede to your request. Show me to her presence."

Mrs. Duerdon was sitting at her davenport writing. She got up immediately on Mr. Shaw's entrance.

"I have been very busy, you see," she remarked. "Muriel has been helping, or rather hindering. She is a most careless child, so I started her off upstairs again."

"She would be better there," replied Mr. Shaw. "Let her be with her brother whilst she can."

"Oh, she can be with him altogether until Norman gets better. I have quite given in to that," remarked Mrs. Duerdon grandly.

She arranged her silk dress around her.

"Mr. Shaw says Norman is very ill, Clara," put in Mr. Duerdon.

"Ah," returned Mrs. Duerdon equably, "you are always telling one something unpleasant, Fred; if you would repeat anything agreeable, it would be a desirable change." Then turning to Mr. Shaw, she said, "It really is very tiresome about Norman. I cannot think what is the matter with him. We do everything that is ordered for him, yet he does not seem to improve. My husband is over-anxious, quite absurd. He certainly does not seem better."

"No, nor ever will be, Mrs. Duerdon, I assure you."

Mrs. Duerdon looked incredulous.

"Ah, he takes you in like the rest."

"No, Mrs. Duerdon, you are mistaken; Norman Vivian is, I am sorry to say, seriously ill."

"It is only apathy, an inclination to indolence, a weakness of character that Norman possesses."

"I repeat, you are mistaken," spoke Mr. Shaw, rather sharply.

He was astonished at the lady's obstinacy, yet he feared to contradict her too abruptly.

"Mr. Belgrave quite agrees with me in my opinion," said Mrs. Duerdon triumphantly. "He says Norman requires energy."

"I am sorry to dissent from so valuable a voice," replied Mr. Shaw with quiet sarcasm. "My opinion is in this case totally opposed to Mr. Belgrave's, and I am afraid you will find that I am right."

"Mr. Duerdon has infected you with his ideas, I fear," rejoined that gentleman's wife. "You do not form an unbiased opinion. He cared much for his sister, and values her children accordingly."

"No one has influenced me. I can see with my medical experience that no apathy or indolence would account for Norman's illness."

Mr. Shaw spoke most gravely, and Mrs. Duerdon was at last impressed.

"Well, what can we do more than has been done?" she asked. "We have been most considerate of his welfare and comfort in every way. Every one has given up to his wishes, and my aches and pains have had no sympathy."

"He is well looked after in all ways," owned Mr. Shaw. "There is nothing that I could wish altered save and except the results."

"The results," repeated Mrs. Duerdon in a musing tone.

"Yes; they will, I am sorry to inform you, be fatal. Norman cannot recover. A short time and all will be over with him in this world."

"Cannot recover," gasped Mrs. Duerdon, catching at the two principal words; "you do not mean to say he will—he will die."

"That most unfortunately is my meaning."

And Mr. Shaw bowed his head. He was more grieved than the lady was.

"I consider," said Mrs. Duerdon, rising from her chair, "I consider that I have been most abruptly informed of Norman's danger; my feelings have been totally ignored, lost sight of. Why was I not told sooner? Are my affections to be lacerated like this?"

So saying Mrs. Duerdon took out her handkerchief, and held it to her eyes.

"Is this all the reward we are to get for the careful way in which we have brought him up?" bemoaned she. "Is he going to die just at a time when we expected a return for our kindness? It is very thoughtless of him to die now."

Mr. Duerdon looked up.

"Had study anything to do with Norman's illness?" he asked quickly. "Ought we to have kept him back?"

Mr. Shaw deliberated.

"Over-study with boys of his calibre is undesirable. Too much brain in a delicate body and the result is too often death."

"The masters should be able to put on the screw at the right time," remarked Mr. Duerdon. "Norman's masters all tell me of his unusual quickness and ability. None of them say they tried to keep him back."

"A love of praise—a desire to have a pupil held up to the public gaze as a genius—a precocity—an eight days' wonder leads them to err. Great mischief undoubtedly is done annually by this desire for fame. Parents are daily failing in this respect."

"Yet the masters were all so fond of Norman. Frequent messages are they sending for news of his health."

"True. Parents generally love their children; yet why sacrifice them? The thing is not intentional, you see. Some brains expand without injuring the bodily powers, but the case is exceptionally rare."

"You think Norman has suffered from this cause?" interrogated Mr. Duerdon in a low voice. "Would that I had stopped it."

"No, I think nothing of the sort," replied Mr. Shaw decidedly. "Norman's disease was inherited. And his growing so rapidly was against him."

"He had everything nourishing to eat," be-

wailed Mrs. Duerdon, "he lived as we do. Why is he dying, and lots of poor badly fed children are strong and healthy?"

"Death is not to be awed; he comes to all, the prince as well as the peasant. Golden gates cannot lock him out."

"Would that he had gone to some one else," moaned Mr. Duerdon. "Our bright, handsome Norman."

"His face makes no difference," said Mrs. Duerdon fretfully; then leaning back in her chair she burst into a flood of tears. "I never thought he would die," wailed she. "I wanted him to go away from me, but not to die—not—no—no"—and she cried hysterically.

"It is a sad, sad pity," agreed Mr. Shaw gravely. "Norman is a truly lovable lad. But after all you must both remember we must come to it." Mrs. Duerdon shuddered. "We must all die. He is but going to a better home."

"True, true," murmured Mr. Duerdon, "but would that he had not gone so young!"

"Never too young to inherit perfect and everlasting happiness," answered Mr. Shaw, getting up to take his leave.

The doctor's sad fiat soon flew over the house. It was no news in one way, for all had thought before that there was but little hope; now they *knew* there was none. It was quite true, because the verdict was passed by Mr. Shaw. There was

no longer room for doubt, no frail straw of hope to cling to; the straw was suddenly withdrawn, and hope fled. Despair, which needs no prop, stood up grimly in its stead.

Mrs. Duerdon soon recovered from *her* grief. She was sorry Norman was going to die. It did seem, she said, a great pity, but there were lots of people who could be worse spared than he, and if he had to go, where was the use of lamenting?

"I can bear trials calmly," she observed to Major one day.

"So can any one as does not feel them," answered that young person bluntly. "If it had been Master Owen as was to be taken instead, you'd perhaps not bear it so calm."

"Major, you get unpleasantly rude and familiar," reproved Mrs. Duerdon coldly. "No one can justly say that I make any difference between my own son and Master Norman."

Major sniffed; then she got out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"I don't know as you have done lately, ma'am," she owned. "No one in this world could be unkind to such a sweet-mannered, obliging young gentleman. Oh, my! oh, dear!"

And Major had recourse to her handkerchief again.

"That will do," said Mrs. Duerdon, waving her hand. "It is marvellous to me the utter disregard you all have to my feelings; such tender feelings as I have too."

And the lady rocked herself backwards and forwards.

"What dress did you want me to see about?" inquired Major, jerking herself up suddenly. "Is it the crimson or blue?"

"Why, how thoughtless you are to be sure!" exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon. "I want you to set to about my mourning. You will have a lot to do; you may as well set to in time."

"My word!" ejaculated Major, in horrified amazement. "You never mean to say you want me to begin that before the breath is even gone out of his poor body!"

"Good Major! what harm? He will not be hurt by it. He will never know; no one will tell him."

"But I should know, and you would, and so would all the shop people, and it's fine respect that would be paying to Master Norman. Just fancy going to order mourning! 'Who for?' would ask the servers. 'Master Norman Vivian,' I should say. 'Is he dead?' they would ask; 'oh! when did he die?' and I should look nice and kind to say, 'He is not dead yet, but we'—oh, laws! I ain't a-going to do it for anybody in the whole kingdom."

"You will have to do," replied Mrs. Duerdon. "I brook no disobedience to my orders."

"You may get some one else then. I like Master Norman far too well to sit sewing mourning while he's alive for you to wear in sorrow for him. No;

every time I stuck my needle in I should say to myself I had pierced it in his flesh. You can send me away, but not one stitch will I do, draining his heart blood away."

Major had Mrs. Duerdon under her thumb, and she knew it.

"What do you think people would say?" continued the maid. "I fancy, ma'am, even you would scarcely care to give your reason for turning me away. It would sound well, would it not? 'She had to leave because she would not make mourning for a person before he died.'"

Major had hit the right nail on the head. Mrs. Duerdon did not mind about *doing wrong*, but she *did* mind others knowing that she had done it.

"You are very whimsical and fanciful, Major; you can leave the room. Take time to think the matter over, and give me your advice."

"There's no need to spend one minute in the occupation of thinking, ma'am; I am quite decided."

Major tossed herself out of the room.

"A fine sight of grief *she's* in, horrid thing! I think we all love him more than *she* does. Ah! that's Mr. Mervin leaving Master Norman's room. I wonder what he thinks about it all. Poor Master Norman! It's a shame and a pity, that it is!"

If Major could only have peeped into the schoolroom then, as she did at odd times, she could have seen Norman lying on the sofa as

usual, his eyes closed, perhaps in fatigue after the vicar's visit. Muriel stood by, bathing his head with vinegar and water. Spence held the basin.

"I am much refreshed, thanks, Muriel; that will do, dear."

Muriel wiped the forehead gently with her cambric handkerchief; then she stooped down and kissed it.

"I will rest for an hour now, Muny. Will you run out, dear, and get a little fresh air? Do. I am going to tell you a short story this afternoon; that is if I can."

"One of your nice amusing stories, Nor, such as you used to tell? What imagination you have!"

"No, darling, quite a different kind. Now run off, dear."

But Muriel, looking at the dear face, saw tears falling through the closed eyelids, falling fast on his cheeks. She paused for a minute as if to catch breath; then she knelt down on the carpet and put one arm lovingly round Norman's neck. He opened his eyes with a delighted start.

"I thought you had gone," he exclaimed.

"No; I cannot go and leave you in trouble, Nor."

"My tears were not caused by sadness, Muny. I am glad, dear. The thought of my story occasioned the tears."

"Then do not think of it again. Banish everything that causes the tears, then I will go."

"Look at me now, Muny; do I look likely to cry?"

And Muriel, looking as she was bidden, met one of the most beautiful smiles. It was like the sun shining immediately after it had reappeared from behind a cloud. She left, but she popped her head in the schoolroom again after she had donned her outdoor clothing.

Spence held up a warning finger; Norman was asleep. It made Muriel's heart easier to leave him thus. She shut the door quietly, and ran downstairs. Mrs. Duerdon was coming out of the dining-room.

"Where are you going, Muriel, in that giddy style of yours?" she asked crossly. "Racing down the stairs as if there were no trouble in the house."

Muriel's gladness vanished instantaneously.

"I am going to have a short run in the Park," she replied.

"You heartless girl! How can you make up your mind to leave your brother alone when you know he likes to have you there with him so much?"

There was a slight quiver on Muriel's lips.

"I left him asleep," she said. "He wished me to come."

"Is that the truth? You put it strangely. How could he ask you to do anything if he were asleep? It is your own selfishness I verily believe."

"Norman wanted me to get a little fresh air, and whilst I got my things on he fell asleep."

"Well, why could you not say so at once? Where is Owen?"

"I do not know, Mrs. Duerdon. He has been with Norman a long time this morning, lying on the sofa with him."

"That must not be allowed. He will, or at any rate he may, suffer from Norman's breath. It is always undesirable in cases of illness."

Every feeling of Muriel's rose in mutiny against this speech, but she kept command over herself.

"And it is fatiguing to Norman to let Owen stay there, so Spence can easily put a stop to it," answered Muriel.

"It is a great pity, Muriel, that you are not more like Norman," remarked Mrs. Duerdon. "Your character seems to be composed of selfishness."

"I would I were like Norman," answered the girl fervently. "Oh! I would I were. Norman is nearly perfect."

And as she went on her short walk Muriel breathed the wish over many times, whilst all the while Mrs. Duerdon's words rang in her ear—heartless, selfish, composed of selfishness.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I WONDER, Muny, how it is that Mrs. Duerdon has not been to see me for the last few days. Is she quite well?"

"Quite well, Nor. I suppose she will come again when the fancy takes her."

"Yes, dear; but I do not want to wait until then. Will you go and ask her if she will come upstairs now?"

This was the afternoon of the day in which Norman's story was to be told.

"I will come by-and-bye," replied Mrs. Duerdon, in answer to Norman's request. "I am reading an interesting book at present."

"I think Norman wants you particularly," urged Muriel timidly.

"All right, dear," spoke up Mr. Duerdon, who was reading a newspaper, "I will come if that will do."

"I do not know," answered Muriel doubtfully. "He said he wanted Mrs. Duerdon because she has not been for some days."

"You had better go, Clara," whispered her husband in a low tone.

"That I am sure I shall not," declared Mrs. Duerdon loudly. "I cannot bear to go into the schoolroom now."

"Give my love to Norman," said Mr. Duerdon,

"and ask him if I may come and have tea in the schoolroom."

Muriel disappeared. Very disturbed and indignant felt she.

"Is she coming, Many?" inquired Norman anxiously.

"Not at present, dear; she is"—here Muriel hesitated; she was a very truthful girl—"engaged."

"You say that, Sis, as if under protest."

"I do, dear; Mrs. Duerdon is reading."

Norman sighed.

"You do not mind, Nor; you know what she is; you must make full allowance."

"All right, Sis; we shall do as well without her, that is if she won't come."

Muriel delivered Mr. Duerdon's message, and a knock came at the door.

"He is here almost as soon as you," smiled Norman.

"Mr. Duerdon would not knock; it must be Ernest or"—

Before Muriel's cogitations proceeded any farther the door opened, and Alan Murray came in.

"Well, old fellow," he said, taking both Norman's hands, "are you not pleased to see me?"

"I am, Alan, unexpectedly glad."

"How did you come?" asked Muriel.

"Rode over from Stonecourt. I only got home last night, so you see I have not waited long to come."

Alan had been at Harrow for the last few weeks. He had gone suddenly; at least the arrangements for his going had been made all at once.

"Do you like Harrow, Alan?"

"So, so, my boy. I do not care for study anywhere. Let us talk about you, not about me."

"I am so glad you have come, Alan," exclaimed Norman presently. "I was going to write to you."

Alan looked at the delicate, flushed face and the thin hands, and thought how little they were fitted for any exertion, but he did not say so.

"My mother was surprised to see me home last night," laughed Alan. "She could not believe I was really come home for the Easter holidays until I said I came as much to see you as anything."

"How good of you, Alan!" exclaimed Norman and Muriel together.

"Very good to myself. Do you know, Norman, I could not settle until I had come to see you again."

Norman smiled.

"I am pleased to see you once more," he said. "You will not mind listening to a short story I have to tell Muriel, will you. Perhaps you had better go downstairs and see Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon meanwhile."

"I have paid my devoirs, and done the correct thing. Why do you want to get rid of me, Norman?"

"Oh!" said Muriel in disavowal.

"It was only because it is rather a sad story," said Norman, "but I must tell it."

Alan looked up quickly. He knew what Norman meant.

"I will stay here," he said in a hushed voice, but he walked farther away and sat down near the table.

His strong, muscular frame, broad-shouldered and powerful, was a great contrast to Norman's, slim, fragile figure.

Muriel propped her brother up at his request, and then took a seat on a stool at his feet, her face towards him, her back towards Alan.

Norman's thin hands worked nervously together.

"I must have some of my medicine, Muny, before I begin, please."

"I will get it, sir," said Spence, and in her slow methodical way she measured the draught out.

"Thank you," he said, making a wry face after it. "Spence, would you like an hour to yourself?"

"I will avail myself of a short time, Master Norman," she replied, fully understanding that her presence was not required. "If you want me, Miss Muriel, please to ring. I shall not be far off."

"And now the coast is clear," said Norman, in quite a brisk voice, "I feel more myself. Spence sits by like a silent judge, and nobody knows how it bothers me."

"I think she is a very kind one, Nor."

"Yes, poor soul, she means to be, only her presence is a restraint. But this is in confidence, entre nous; I would not hurt her feelings for the world. Now for my tale. Once upon a time lived a lady and a gentleman who had three children."

"Three!" repeated Alan, looking up in astonishment.

"Yes, my dear, three. One of them died, and"—

"Oh, I see," interrupted Alan, and his face fell. "One died, and there were two left."

"Was it any one we knew, Nor, or was"—

"Muny," said Norman gravely, "there must be no interruptions, or I shall not have strength to conclude my story. There were two left, a little boy and girl. The parents were very fond of these children, and thought there was no one like them. But alas! the papa was taken ill and died, and the mamma did not long survive him."

Norman paused.

"Were their parents well off?" asked Muriel. "It would be sad if they were left to a cold, heartless world."

"No, they had but little money; but they did not need it. A kind gentleman came forward and said they should have a home with him, as long as they needed one. And nobly he kept his word."

"They grew up then?" asked Alan, quickly.

Norman did not heed the question.

"You will, perhaps, wonder what kind of children they were," continued Norman. "They were the ordinary average children; full of health and spirits, fun, and love for one another; and they, more especially the boy, were full of faults and failings."

"Oh, Nor," exclaimed Muriel, in a relieved tone. "I am glad it was the boy that was naughty. I was actually beginning to think that you meant us. What a relief."

Norman fixed his large, grey eyes earnestly on her, and went on.

"The girl was good and sweet, and amiable, with never one thought of herself. All that she could see of good was in others. The boy was—was—well, full of love for his sister, impulsive, reckless, and, oh, Muny, full of ambition; he had powers and abilities beyond the common, and he determined to make the most of them."

"Very laudable and praiseworthy of him," declared Alan, stoutly. "A boy like that deserved all encouragement. How proud my mother would have been had I been one of that sort, instead of an idle, scrapegrace kind of fellow."

"It is different in your case, Alan; there is no need to study. Honour and position lie close to your hand, you have only to wait until you come of age, and they are yours. This boy that I am talking of had no such prospect."

"No, Norman, dear, perhaps not; but he was a

far nobler, braver character. One whom to see was to love; one for whom I have the greatest respect and admiration."

"Do you know him, too?" asked Muriel, quickly. "Was he one of the boys at your school?"

Alan bowed his head in the affirmative.

"Hush," went on Norman, "the sad part is coming. The boy became ill, and ought to have rested; his kind guardian wanted him to do so; his sister begged of him to desist, she begged implored, entreated—it was all no good, the boy was obstinate, wayward, determined; his ambition could not be stilled. He must conquer all and go on. And he did go on, defying fatigue—flying in the face of all his friends' wishes, persisting in his own way, until at last he had to give in, his strength was gone, his health destroyed; and the boy only went home to—die."

"Poor, poor boy," exclaimed Muriel, breathlessly. "How did he bear it? Could he bear to go and leave all his hopes of fame and glory? Was he reconciled to his lot?"

Muriel was gazing full into her brother's face, with deep earnestness—there were tears in her eyes, but Norman did not read the signs aright. Alan's head was down on the table, but no one heeded him.

"Well, Muny, love; that is the worst part of the story—the boy could not get resigned—he could not give up his hopes and ambition."

"Oh, Norman," groaned Muriel; "that is sadder than anything."

"But it was only for a time; dear Muny, love, come near me; lay your head against me, so; there, dear, let me stroke your hair. You understand my tale, pet? You guess who the boy and girl were?"

A stifled moan escaped Muriel, and tears, hot and heavy, rolled down her cheeks; but she tried to keep them back. Not yet. Oh, not yet, must she give way to them. She bowed her head.

"I know, Nor, that you are—are going to heaven; it will be a very beautiful place, a glorious, happy place."

"Yes, Muny; and as my heart thinks of its glories it swells with rapture; and for myself I have not one regret left—all, all is joy; for myself, love, you understand. Alan, old fellow; come here, too. Listen to me whilst I speak of things which I have longed to speak of, and dared not, for fear of giving pain."

"Norman, how calmly you speak; it hurts me; you seem happy, glad to go."

"So I am, Alan. I long now to be off."

And Norman clasped his hands together. And, oh, the look of peace and joy on his poor, faded face.

Muriel seemed to enter into the glories of the prospect—into her brother's happiness. His heart was at rest. What mattered self? She could endure.

"Is that future, Norman, those sunny days that we so often planned together, is it all given up, without one regret?" she asked.

"It is, love. All those bright dreams that we wove were very fair, darling; very fair; but they were dreams. The golden castles which we raised so hopefully required more materials than earth could bring together for their permanent foundation. They were of the earth—earthy. We should have been very happy in each other's society, Muny; very happy," and he sighed; "but God ordered it otherwise. I am going to mamma, and we shall always watch over you until you join us."

This picture recalled to Muriel her own desolation. One little sob escaped her.

"Alan, you will be kind to Muny; you will be a brother in the days to come. You will see that she does not grieve too much."

"Not another brother. No, Nor; no one can be that," wailed Muriel. "I do not want any one else."

"But I will be your friend, Muriel, if you will let me. I will always look upon you as my sister. Norman, she shall be my care. My mother, too, will look after her; and you know what my mother is."

"There, Sis; be comforted," said Norman; "that is as I would have wished it, and if you can be happy, dear, all will be well. The loss is yours, the gain mine. What would it have been if I had

attained to all the knowledge that I once considered so noble, risen to great honour and fame; all that this world deems so glorious? It would have been nothing, nothing. I should still have been straining, striving to reach a higher goal. Nothing thoroughly satisfies here."

"Norman, you are getting tired," said Alan; "lie down, dear boy. There, are you not more comfortable now?"

Norman smiled a bright, grateful smile; and he squeezed one of Muriel's hands warmly between his.

"When I first realized that I was going to die, it was hard, Muny. There, love, give me your other hand. I like to feel you near. It was hard. I felt I could not go. I was young, with life stretching out in fair promise before me, so hopeful and bright. Many a battle I waged in secret, many a silent fight. I could not—would not go. Death was my enemy, darling. I knew he held me in his iron clutches, and I was determined to resist his power. Why should he take me, there were others anxious, perhaps, to go? Old enough, at any rate; whilst I was young and tender. And we grappled and fought, darling. Let me have a drink—thanks, Alan. I, in my ignorance, hoping to crush him. But it was useless. Each contest left me weaker and unhappier, more at his cruel mercy; it was a fearful time."

The perspiration rolled down Norman's face, the

recollection even of the past upset him. Muriel took her handkerchief, wiped it off, and kissed the dear face.

"And then," continued Norman, "I had to keep my grief from Muny. I feared its effects for her."

"You should not have done that, Nor," she said. "I could bear anything for you. Together we might have made the yoke easier to be borne."

"I was wrong, rebellious, and desperate, Muny; it would never have done to let you have a look into my heart then; you, with your noble nature, would have been shocked at me. I do not know why it was that I was so obstinate about not giving way. I often wonder now—now that all is peace within—why I was so firmly resolved not to die. Mr. Mervin talked to me so nicely, reverently, kindly. I knew God was very good, and heaven far better than here; and yet—yet, Muny, I did not want to go."

He paused for breath. His eyes closed. Tears were pouring down Alan's face, and he fidgeted in his chair. Muriel was almost beside herself with grief. She longed to throw herself on the floor, and cry in the bitterness of despair. But it could not be yet; no, not yet. Norman must be comforted, encouraged. She prayed inwardly for self-control. A little longer, just a little longer.

"I am getting tired," proceeded Norman, wearily, "but I should like to say just a little more. My difficulty at that time arose from my inability to

say, 'Thy will be done.' When we can say that, all else comes easy; but I could not say it. My will was uppermost, not God's. Mr. Mervin prayed, and I prayed; but help did not seem to come. 'It will be yours,' said Mr. Mervin, 'if you still pray on;' and it came at last."

"Nor, darling," said Muriel, speaking with effort, "it puzzles me that you, always good, devout, and prayerful, had that difficulty. My gentle brother, I thought you ever said 'Thy will be done,' from your heart."

"So thought I, Muny; but I found my mistake. Do you remember that dreadful afternoon, darling, when I awoke from my dream in such a fright—you recollect?"

Muriel bowed her head.

"Very well do I remember it, Nor."

"Well, Sis, I dreamt then that Death had me—we had been fighting again, and he was carrying me off without giving me one moment to say good-bye in. I struggled with him; I would not go, and I—could not—get my—breath."

"Hush, Nor," said Muriel, pleadingly, her heart beating to suffocation; but she would not heed it. "Hush, do not talk of that time, now all is changed. Tell Alan and me what you think of—of—what you"—

"Yes, I know what you mean, dear," said Norman, squeezing her hands again in his poor, hot ones. "I changed all at once, Muny. It was that evening, at the village school, when we cele-

brated the Royal wedding. I saw the crowds then all intent on their own pleasures. Each had an end and aim of his own. Each strove to be first, no matter what the object to be gained. I saw myself then, and it struck me how vain and futile were the things we all strove after. Mine seemed higher to me, but would it to God? Ignoble must all our desires seem to Him. The one thing needful was laid aside until a more convenient season. The scales fell off my eyes, the burden from my heart; and though part of the time in agony and doubt about my poor ankle, a strange peace came into my soul, which has never, never since passed away. Things fleeting, evanescent, perishable, no more trouble me."

"You were always too good for this world, Norman," broke in Alan, in sorrow.

Norman shook his head in dissent, and then proceeded—

"God spoke to me then, I felt it. Mr. Mervin was right, my prayers had received an answer, and now I am all at rest. My only grief is leaving you, Muny, my darling. How can you bear it? Will you try? Will not you also, dear sister, try and make that beautiful prayer your own, 'Thy will be done?'"

Muriel's head went down, she nearly gave way. Oh the desolation and the misery that stretched before her! But not yet, oh not yet, must she give way.

"Muny, darling, say you will try. Oh, Muny, Muny, my much-loved sister."

Norman's cry roused her effectually. She raised her head.

"Look at me, Nor," she said, "look at me. Do not I seem as if I could bear it for your sake? And aye, more, darling, if more could be borne."

Norman looked at her, and one of her sweetest smiles shone on her brave young face. No martyr ever exceeded Muriel in the fortitude she displayed then. What to her would have been death to the separation from her brother? Nothing; it would but have set her spirit free. But her trial was of short duration; Norman, luckily looked away, or she must have broken down. He leant forward and kissed her dear face over and over again, and thus missed the twitchings and tremblings that would have way.

"What a dear, good, unselfish Muriel you are," exclaimed Norman. "No brother was ever blessed with sister like mine. I am so glad, dear, so glad."

"Glad, dear!" she echoed, and if a slight tone of reproach escaped her, she had not meant it.

"Yes, glad for everything. Glad of my prospects of heaven; glad that you bear the separation so bravely. Oh, Muny, darling, it is so good of you; it was my only trouble; it was indeed. Now —all—is—gladness."

Alan got up and left the room abruptly; he could stand no more.

"Oh don't, Norman," wailed Muriel, overcome; "do not talk again. It is very very hard. I feel as if my heart would break, but I will bear it, darling; I will, I will indeed."

Spence came in.

"Miss Muriel, what have you been doing to let the fire get so low?" she asked.

Muriel looked round.

"Never mind it, Spence," answered Norman, "I am very warm. Put the rug on me, and I will take a sleep."

There was silence in the room after this. Muriel waited until her brother slept and then made her escape out of the room. Whither, whither to go; the world was to her darkness and gloom everywhere.

An hour later tea was served in the schoolroom. Alan, Owen, and Mr. Duerdon all helped to make the meal pass quietly happy; and Norman, who did not talk much, being fatigued after his late excitement, watched them with pleasure. Muriel sat near him; her face was very grave and subdued, but she always took care to give Norman a bright glance whenever he looked at her.

"What brings you home from Harrow at this time?" asked Mr. Duerdon of Alan Murray. "I thought they kept you pretty strictly there."

"I have come away for the Easter holidays," answered Alan with unblushing effrontery.

"Well, you have come in good time," said Mr.

Duerdon laughing. "You believe in taking time by the forelock."

"It's not much more than a fortnight off," remarked Alan carelessly.

"Can you spend part of it here? Norman will be delighted to have you."

"And I should be delighted to come; but there's the mother you see. She would not like me to be away. I shall run over most days; I have a nice horse at present."

"Well, come as often as you can," said Mr. Duerdon.

"I will; thank you," responded Alan.

The next day Norman was very restless. It was quite painful to see him. He could not find ease in any way from his weariness; but in the afternoon he got slightly better.

"I long for the time of my departure," he remarked to Muriel in low tones.

"Oh, Nor," replied Muriel reproachfully.

"I do, darling; I am so weary now. It has been a hard time for me, and a bitter burden to bear, but"—

He said no more. There was no need; great significance was in his final word.

"Are you not afraid, Nor; afraid to die?"

"Not in the least, love. I have conquered Death thus far. If I could not master him, I have risen far above all fear; he has lost his sting. I shall smile at him, welcome him when he comes; look

upon him as a friend, who will lead me from gloom into glory. No, he has no terrors for me."

And a smile crossed the face of the gentle boy.

"Nor, it is very dreadful to die," said Muriel shuddering.

She had all youth's fear and dread of the grim king of terrors.

"To change sorrow for joy, sickness for health, unrest for peace, trouble for happiness. Muny, is this, and ever so much more, hard? Why, Muriel, just think of it; the joy, the love, the peace perfect, unending. I would not change with any one. Death is kind to lead me to so much glory."

"Will you not shrink back when the time comes?" inquired Muriel. "Will you go on unshrinkingly, fearlessly?"

"I shall not be afraid, at least, I trust not, darling. You know the twenty-third Psalm; it has wiped away all fears. He will be with me, what more do I need?" He sighed once or twice heavily. "Will you sing 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' Muny? How often we have sung it together."

She got up at once, but the feeling was "We have done, but soon I shall sing it alone, and there will be none with me." Her voice faltered, and she was very glad when an interruption came, though it was a noisy one; anything better than breaking down. Where was her bravery? The nterruption came from Owen; he rushed into the schoolroom crying aloud. Muriel turned round on

the music stool in hasty dismay ; she held up one finger warningly. Not the least notice took Owen. On to Norman he pressed, the very picture of misery; his eyes red and swollen, his fair hair rumpled, and one sock down in his shoe. Spence was not in the room, or she would have taken him away.

"Owen, little man, what is the trouble," asked Norman kindly. "Come and sit near me and let us see if we cannot smooth it away."

"You can, Norday, if you will; Sarah says you can," answered the little fellow hastily. "She would not let me come, but I ran away."

"Give over crying and tell me what it is then; a kite string broken or a top lost. What is the big trouble? I thought you were half killed, Owen, by the great commotion."

Muriel came up and wiped the child's tear-stained face.

"You are getting a big boy now, Owen," she said; "too old to cry aloud."

Owen's face puckered.

"Sarah says," he began, and then burst out crying again.

"Sarah says what?" inquired Muriel. "Brother Norday is tired, you must make haste and leave him."

"She says"—and here Owen roared out loudly at the recollection of his grief—"she says Norday is going to die, and that he will never, never get better; he does not want to do."

Strange as it may seem, Owen had only just learnt Norman's danger; it had been kept from him, and he alone of all in the house, village, it may be said, was ignorant of it; and when he became cognisant of it, his child-like grief was overpowering.

"Do you know, Owen, where one goes when they die?" asked Norman gently. "Kneel by me here and do not cry, there's a good boy."

"They go in the deep burying ground," sobbed Owen; "and there's a lot of ground put on them, and they never come back."

Norman smiled; it was the usual idea of a little child.

"Don't go, Norday, it is so dreffful; I won't let them take you. Douglas bought me two such beauty pigeons yesterday, and I will give them to you. You shall have rabbits and the guinea pig, and everything if you will only stay."

Norman was quite upset; his face worked convulsively for a few seconds, whilst Muriel leaned her head against the piano and cried bitterly. Norman was the first to recover; he drew the little boy towards him.

"We do not stay in the ground, Owen," he said, smiling brightly at the child. "We should not like to stay there."

"You cannot get out," persisted Owen. "They screw you down in a big box, and they keep you there; Frank told me so."

"Frank was mistaken then. You know about

the angels in heaven, Owen; always happy, always singing, dressed in white and"—

"Oh yes, I know," interrupted the child; "having harps in their hands and crowns on their heads. Oh! Norday! I should like to be an angel too."

"That's just what I am going to be, Owen; a beautiful angel, free from pain."

Owen looked amazed.

"How will you get there?" he asked.

"I shall have wings and fly."

"You have not got them yet," said the child, feeling Norman's shoulders. "What will they be made of?"

"Of cloud and sky, I should think—pieces of both."

"Oh, I thought they would have been of bright gold," replied the little fellow in a disappointed tone.

"They may be; I cannot say. But gold is heavy, wings must be light."

There was silence for a minute.

"Oh! Norday!" said Owen at last. "Oh! I should like to be an angel."

"So you will some time, Owen, if you try to do what is right."

"I do not want to wait; I want to come with you."

"Papa and mamma could not spare you yet awhile, Owen," said Norman in a hushed tone; "they would miss their little boy."

"Then you must not go"—and Owen began to cry again—"we cannot do without you."

Norman was touched by the child's affection; such an amount was totally unexpected. Again he drew the little boy to him.

"Hush, Owen," he whispered; "look at Muriel how sad she is. What will she do? You must take care of her. You are growing quite a man. You must be her brother, will you?"

Muriel's hands had wandered softly over the keys whilst the above conversation went on. She caught most of it; and, strange as it may seem, Owen's grief in some way soothed her. It was fellow-feeling, although in one so young. But she thought Norman would be upset, so she left the piano and went and stood near. Her face was very white, and she clasped and unclasped her fingers incessantly.

"It is time for you to run away now, Owen," she said. "You may stay after tea for a few minutes."

Owen's little face looked up wistfully at Norman.

"I am going away, Norday," he said; "and I will be a good boy for ever if you will stay. If not, I shall cry from morning till night. It's no good being good if you leave us."

"He is a funny child," remarked Muriel, after Owen had gone.

"He is a very nice one; I hope they will train him right," answered Norman.

About five minutes later Mr. Duerdon came in.

"How flushed and restless you look, my boy," he observed anxiously.

"I have overtired myself, Uncle Fred."

"That is scarcely wise, is it?" asked the gentleman kindly, going up and poking the fire. "Where is Spence?"

"Gone out for a few hours," replied Muriel. "Mrs. Duerdon gave her permission."

"Uncle Fred, come here," said Norman.

Mr. Duerdon went.

"Stoop down near me, I want to see your face close—so—there now. Uncle Fred, thank you so much for all your goodness to us both. I shall tell mamma how good you have been. Thank you for ever. Good-bye."

"Not good-bye just yet, my gentle boy," answered Mr. Duerdon, with a strange quiver in his voice; "I wish I could have done more."

"That would have been impossible, simply impossible; you have been goodness itself," said Norman gratefully. "I will say nothing about Muriel's future. It is needless; you are sure to do your best."

"I will, my boy; but say not another word; we understand one another."

"Thank you again so much, dear Uncle Fred."

And Norman leant forward and kissed his guardian once, twice, several times, then sank back.

"There, there, my precious boy, stay still and rest. Muriel, you can go out for a quarter of an hour round the Park, the air will do you good."

CHAPTER XV.

Mrs. Duerdon and Owen were left to their own resources in the drawing-room that evening. Mr. Duerdon did not join them. He stayed with Norman, and the lady was not pleased. The time hung heavy on her hands, and Owen was troublesome.

"I wonder what keeps your papa," queried she irritably. "He has no thought; I am worn to death with you."

Master Owen was not impressed by this speech; he went on tumbling the things down.

"Leave those books alone," grumbled Mrs. Duerdon. "Owen, if you do not stay quiet I will whip you."

The little fellow looked round.

"You won't let me stir," he whimpered. "I wish Norman was here."

"Or Muriel, I suppose," rejoined Mrs. Duerdon slightingly; "anybody is better than your mother."

Owen fixed his blue eyes on her then.

"Are you my mother?" he asked. "Sarah has a mother, I heard her talking about her. I wish I could be an angel."

If he had expressed a desire to be a Hottentot,

Mrs. Duerdon could not have looked more horrified.

"Good gracious! child. What sort of an angel?"

"Norman's kind, mamma; with light wings and crowns and—and white dresses."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Duerdon sharply; "who has been telling you those stories?"

"They are not stories; they are real and true, Norday says so. I am going to him too by-and-bye; he says I may."

"Norman wants scolding for saying such rubbish," retorted the lady angrily; "you are not to be an angel."

"I will be," said Owen stamping his foot.

"You shall not."

"I shall."

The battle waxed warm.

"Norman is going to be put in the ground," remarked Mrs. Duerdon in desperation; "no one will see him; and it will be cold. You would not like that."

Owen's eyes opened wide.

"But he can get out, he told me so; and he'll fly and be an angel; and that's what I will do."

"You silly, silly child, to believe any rubbish that is told you. Run away and play now, and think no more about angels."

Owen's eyes fell; he began to cry.

"I thought Norday was going to heaven," he

said. "I do not want him to go in the cold ground."

"What's the rumpus here? Owen, what's the matter?"

Turning round Owen saw his papa.

"The child's been an abominable nuisance all the evening," declared Mrs. Duerdon fretfully. "You have no right to leave him to me. He has taken some absurd notions into his head now about heaven and angels, which I have seen good to correct."

"I am sorry you have been overtasked, Clara; I will take him away. Say good-night to mamma, little man."

"No I won't," declared Owen sturdily. "She's naughty mamma; and if she is not kind to my sister Muriel, we will run away somewhere and hide."

"Sister Muriel! I wonder what next," exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon. "Run away too; who ever puts the notions in the child?"

"His tale books, I daresay," responded Mr. Duerdon. "Come along, Owen, I will carry you upstairs."

"May I say good-night to Norday, papa?"

"If you will promise to be as quiet as a mouse."

"I will, papa."

But after good-night kisses had been exchanged, Owen burst out,

"Nor, are you going to be an angel? Mamma says it is all rubbish."

Every one was surprised.

"Put him down on the sofa near me, Uncle Fred, for a few minutes, we want to whisper a few words to each other."

"You are sure it will not tire you, Norman?"

"Quite sure, it is only for a few minutes."

The few words were spoken but no one came near. After a time Mr. Duerdon returned to the schoolroom. He met Spence in the corridor, she too was going there.

"Is Owen in bed?" he asked.

"No, sir," she answered. "Sarah cannot think where he is; I expect he will be with Master Norman and Miss Muriel in the schoolroom. But Sarah says 'Nothing of the kind, he's with his mamma in the drawing-room.'"

Mr. Duerdon opened the door. Muriel was lying in the large arm chair fast asleep. He went up to the sofa. Norman was snoring, and closely wrapped in his arms was the little boy, snug and warm, sleeping soundly also. It was a picture.

"Well, for sure," said Spence, proudly, "they all look bonny lambs."

"Better not disturb them," rejoined Mr. Duerdon.

But even as he spoke there was a movement, and all three woke. Owen, cross and fretful, cried loudly as he was carried off. The next morning Norman did not want to get up at all, but was persuaded to do so after dinner. It was his birth-

day. Muriel did not know quite what to do about offering her good wishes. He guessed her dilemma.

"You may give them with safety," he remarked, "for they will be sure to be happy. All others will be spent in heaven. Seventeen years old to day," he said. "Seventeen short, happy years, but what are they in comparison to the unending bliss of bright eternity. Oh, Muny, pray to join me!"

"I shall ever pray for that, dear Nor, you may rest assured. It will be my one constant prayer."

"After a time, Muriel, you will think less"—she made a movement of dissent, but he went on—"think less of me—not love me less—but you may form other ties—other people may engross your heart, but never forget your promise to me."

"I never shall forget it," she answered, solemnly. "And never shall I have cause, for I am not so changeable."

Norman pressed her hand. "Nature's law is change," remarked he. "Nothing remains stationary, it has been so ordained. Improbable as it now seems to us that the bond of affection which knits us so strongly together could ever have been weakened, in all probability something would have occurred to lessen our love; circumstances which we could not have controlled, and which we cannot even now think of, might have arisen which would most inevitably have brought about that result."

"I do not fancy anything would have done so," replied Muriel, incredulously.

"No," agreed Norman, "it certainly seems improbable. And now, dear, our love for each other will not be weakened in the same way, you know what we so often say, 'I believe in the communion of saints.' If we do really believe it how great our comfort."

These words comforted Muriel, and often after Norman's death they recurred to her.

Mr. Duerdon offered his birthday congratulations as usual. Mr. Shaw stood by at the time.

"Generally speaking," remarked the medical man, "I look upon the expression of such speeches as mere compliments. In your case it is different; we know how fully the wish will be realized."

"Mrs. Duerdon is coming to see you, Norman, and speak for herself," said Mr. Duerdon, later on, "after Mr. Shaw has gone."

"I am very glad, Uncle Fred, make her keep her promise. I have a great longing to talk with her a while."

Norman had only been in the schoolroom a short time when she came in.

"Why, Norman," was her first remark, "you look a great deal better. I believe you will get well yet."

The delicate complexion, the crimson flushed cheeks, the bright eye, clear and truthful, all looked well.

"No chance of that," he answered. "It only gets a question of days now—shortly it may be hours."

"How horrid," declared Mrs. Duerdon. "Why, Norman, you have given me the shivers."

"I am sorry to have done that," he answered, with a smile. "I must try to be more careful. Muny, love, leave us for a few minutes—ten say—we will not talk longer."

Muriel looked wistfully at him; she did not want to go, but he nodded pleasantly, so she went.

"Mrs. Duerdon," said Norman, directly they were alone, "I have wanted to speak to you for some days. I want to thank you for all your hospitality to us, for the care and attention you have had paid us, and for all you have ever done. It was hard for you having two children—orphans—thrust upon you."

"I always liked you, Norman," said Mrs. Duerdon, nervously, toying with her lace handkerchief, "you were ever obedient and good."

"We had the usual failings of children," he responded softly, "we erred over and over again, but never willingly; and it was perhaps somewhat trying to you to make allowance for us at all times. We were not your relations, not even the children of some one you know, and not winning in ourselves; but, Mrs. Duerdon, I think God sent us to you for some wise purpose."

She winced uncomfortably—"I do not know about that," she replied. "I did not want either of you here."

"But you will be sorry to lose me, will you not?" he asked gently. "You will sometimes think of the little boy who was here when you first came, and who stayed with you so many years," and Norman raised his clear eyes with his ever-genial smile to her face.

"I wish you would spare me," answered Mrs. Duerdon, raising her handkerchief to her face. "You are all alike, always talking of yourselves. Just think how I feel. What need to ask such a question?"

Norman sighed. "I have something else to mention," he went on. "I want you," he hesitated, his breath came quicker and his cheeks flushed—"I want you to be good to Muriel."

"Oh, Muriel," exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon, contemptuously. "Always Muriel. I am sick of her name, sick of her altogether."

"But you must not be," pleaded the dying boy, eagerly. "You must try to love her. She has such a sweet, lovable character, and she will be so very very lonely."

"I cannot prevent that, Norman. Nothing that I could do would make her less desolate. I know she will miss you."

"Poor Muny," he said softly.

"Mr. Duerdon will see after her; make your mind easy," added Mrs. Duerdon, feeling some little compunction, even she, in her narrow heart.

"But that will not be enough," continued Norman. "I know how good he will be, but I want

you to say that you will strive to understand my sister better. You misjudge her, and I cannot die happy unless you promise to be kind to her. Say, say that you will try."

There was a pause.

"I will, Norman. I do not love your sister, but I give my word never to be unkind to her again. Does that satisfy you? Muriel and I are two antagonistic spirits, but from henceforth I will strive to be just."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Duerdon, that is enough. The time will come when you will love her."

"Never, my dear boy."

"Oh, but you will," asserted Norman, confidently. "It would be impossible to understand her character and not love her."

"Norman, you do not think that I have ever been unkind or unjust to you, do you?" inquired Mrs. Duerden, presently.

"Most certainly not," he replied. "You have always been very kind to me—but—but—Muriel you never"—

"Stop, stop, not another word about Muriel—we have settled about her. But what I want you to say is that you do not blame me in any way for your death. Can people have cause to say that I have in any way helped to bring it on?"

"Most certainly not, dear Mrs. Duerdon," said Norman, taking up her hand and kissing it; "considering my position, you have been very kind. Let me thank you once more for your goodness."

Mrs. Duerdon was touched at last.

"I wish the time had to come over again," she declared heartily, "I would behave very differently. It is too late for me to alter now. I must try to be doubly kind to Muriel. After all," she said, willing to excuse herself, "mince matters as we will, it is an awkward thing to be saddled with other people's children whether you wish to have them or not."

"You have been very kind to me all the time, or nearly all, of my illness," remarked Norman, slowly. "I thought one time you were getting reconciled to us. And then you stayed away, and I feared I had been mistaken."

"I wanted to get you well, Norman; when I found there was no chance I gave up coming."

"That is explained, then," he said. "And now, Mrs. Duerdon, I want you to give me a farewell kiss. I never remember you caressing me once since you came here. Do not let me go away from you thus. In years to come you might grieve over it."

"With pleasure," replied Mrs. Duerdon, and she stooped down and kissed his hot forehead and flushed cheeks. "Norman," she said, speaking with unusual earnestness for her, "I wish we could keep you—I do sincerely."

"I do not," he answered wearily. "This year has been a very long one." He closed his eyes as if in sleep, but Mrs. Duerdon looking at him, saw his lips move as if in prayer. The act was in

accordance with his whole life. He never received any blessing for which he did not thank God.

After that day he kept to his bed; never again was his tall, boyish figure seen hopping or limping with the aid of Muriel's willing arm; nevermore did the schoolroom resound with the merry voice which had cheered its dulness so often—never again—no, Norman had left them for ever. He was confined to his bedroom entirely. The pleasant smile was still to be seen, but only at rare intervals now. Days passed, and there were but few left to Norman. Earth was fading, heaven drawing near. He did not seem conscious of it, he slept and dozed all his time away, and only wakened at odd times to swallow the beef-tea or brandy-and-water that was brought to him. Muriel tried by every artifice she could devise to arouse him out of this dreadful lethargy—it seemed so dreadful for him to pass away before he had said much more. She had such lots of questions to ask him, but it was no good, she could not keep him awake. His smile might turn on her for one minute but the next he was dozing off again.

"Can you not give him some medicine to keep him awake, Mr. Shaw," she asked anxiously one day.

Mr. Shaw shook his head.

"Does sleep do him good—is he better for it?"

"It is better for him to rest as much as possible," was the careful answer.

"Do you think he will waken up refreshed then, after this long sleep?" asked Muriel, quickly.

"We may not dare to hope," responded Mr. Shaw, sadly.

It got to the sixth of April—Easter Monday. Alan had been over but had gone home again. Muriel, who always stayed in the bedroom whenever she could, sat near Norman's bed eating her dinner. That is, she was making believe to eat some—her appetite had failed almost altogether lately. Dinner had been brought up as usual, and she did not wish to be thought ungrateful for the attention. Nurse Spence sat near the window sewing away diligently. Muriel looked at her every now and again almost with a feeling of envy. Spence was so calm, placid, unmoved, whilst she felt so restless and unhappy. How could she bear all this much longer? Already her eyes were dark-rimmed and large with unshed tears, and a hopeless, weary expression lay in their depths, sad to see in one so young. But heavy as was her trouble, grievous and hard to be borne, there was no way out of it, no chance of escaping from it, save by taking up a heavier grief. She sighed sorrowfully, and passed her spoon through the rhubarb tart that lay on her plate.

"I wish Norman would waken," she said to herself, wearily. "It is some time since he had any nourishment. I wonder whether Spence will come and rouse him soon."

Thinking thus, Muriel looked at her brother. She was considerably surprised to find Norman's eyes wide open and fixed on her just as if he had been awake some time; as if it were the most natural thing in the world to lie awake and look at her. Muriel's first feeling was one of delight, he looked so much better, so clear and conscious. Her pleasure and amazement increased when he spoke.

"What are you eating there, Muny, dear?"

"Rhubarb tart, Nor, darling. Are you feeling better?"

"Please give me some," was all his answer.

"Will it be good for you, Nor?"

"I feel so hungry," he said, "let me have it."

Spence came from the window. "You may give it him, Miss Muriel," she said immediately. She understood the request.

Amazed, bewildered, almost doubting her senses, Muriel proceeded to feed him. She quite expected the first spoonful would have been enough, but no, he ate ravenously. When it was all finished he drew a long breath.

"That was good, Muny," he exclaimed. "I always liked toasted cheese. Welsh rabbit, we used to call it in the schoolroom."

"This was not toasted cheese, Nor, darling, it was rhubarb tart; did you enjoy it?"

"Welsh rabbit," he said again, in a dreamy tone. "I wonder why"— Then he stopped ab-

ruptly. His eyes had a dim, far-away look that Muriel had never noticed in them before, and her heart began to beat with dread.

"Spence, has that tart been good for my brother?" asked she anxiously, and she watched the woman's features.

Not a muscle moved. "Aye," she replied, "it will not hurt him."

"But will it not then do him good?" asked Muriel, wistfully.

Before Nurse could answer Norman spoke—"Muny come here. Kneel down by me as you used to do in the schoolroom."

Muriel did as he desired.

"Now, dear, repeat part of that 'Yea, though I walk through the valley.' Do not be afraid, Muny, *I* am not."

With a startled look and a deep-drawn sigh, Muriel hid her head for one minute only, then she raised it, and in a very hushed voice began to repeat the words her brother loved so well.

"Again, dear, please," he begged, when she stopped.

She went on over and over again, and all the while Norman's hand smoothed and caressed her hair and forehead—there was something very touching in the action. Once or twice he repeated words after her—"valley," "death," "no evil," "with me." He seemed to derive great comfort in the Psalm.

Mr. Duerdon came in. He betrayed no surprise, whatever he felt, but took a chair quite close to the dying boy.

"Let me repeat that now," he said, "Norman would like to hear me."

"Thank you, Uncle Fred."

Muriel knelt by the bedside, and Norman continued to stroke her hair, though her head was buried in the counterpane. She felt as if she wished they could stay so for ever. She had no desire to move. Norman's finger stayed still. Mr. Duerdon's voice stopped. She looked up, her brother was asleep. Nurse motioned to her to get up noiselessly. Small need of the caution. She passed out of the room on tiptoe. On, on to her bedroom, she felt stifled—as if she could not breathe. Her heart swelled and ached, her eyes were heavy and burning with their weight of unshed tears. With one deep groan she sank on her knees and prayed earnestly, not for herself but for Norman—Norman, the brother whom she loved with all the depth and strength of her naturally strong heart; prayed that he might pass away easily, quietly—prayed that God would be with him.

Mr. Shaw called during her absence from the room. He only looked at the dying boy—his eyes fixed on the beautiful face.

"He is sinking, Spence," he said. "Let him not be disturbed."

And they did not disturb him from the sleep or

stupor in which he was in. At nine o'clock he wakened for a minute or two, and asked the time. Muriel, who was close by his bedside, told him. He said, "Thank you, Muny, darling," and fell off to sleep again. At ten, Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon, accompanied by Ernest Mervin, visited the bedside, but they did not stay long.

"You had better go to bed, Miss Muriel," suggested Spence. But Muriel only shook her head and fell on her knees by her brother's side.

Before retiring for the night Mr. Duerdon came in once more. "Muriel, dear," he said, his voice and tone of intense kindness, "I cannot have you staying here like this, you will be quite knocked up."

"Only this night, please," she entreated, in a choked voice. "I shall never never need to ask again."

Mr. Duerdon turned away. He could not speak another word. After a time he said—

"Call me Spence when Master Norman awakes."

"Yes, sir."

One more glance a sad lingering glance at the dying boy, and he went out. Muriel and Spence were left alone to keep their dreary watch.

"You are sure, Miss Muriel, you are not afraid, that you can keep up."

Muriel lifted the dreariest face.

"I mean to stay," she said. "Oh Spence, he is going—going—drifting away, oh what shall I do to keep him back."

"Go to bed and sleep," was the answer.

Muriel said no more, that was poor consolation. Time went on no one knew how, a slight tap came to the door. Spence did not catch the sound until the second time. Then she went and opened the door. Sarah stood there crying.

"May I have just a look at him, my dear young gentleman," she asked.

Without waiting for an answer she walked in. One look at the closed eyes, one glance at the laboured breathing, and Sarah gave a terrible scream.

"Oh, Master Norman—Master Norman!" she cried. "I never thought to see you so!"

Norman's eyes opened for an instant. Spence in anger pushed the terrified schoolroom maid out and shut the door after her. When she reached the bed again Norman had dozed off once more, Sarah had scarcely disturbed him.

Midnight passed—one—two struck. The moon outside shone in perfect quietness and splendour. Muriel got up for one minute and glanced at it riding in glorious majesty through the heavens. She pressed her aching head wearily against the window pane glad to feel its coolness. A rapturous cry roused her, such a glad cry as she had not heard from Norman for many a long day. She ran to him.

"Muny—mamma—mamma, see—I—am—coming." A smile glorious in its brightness shone on the poor wasted features, and illuminated his

whole face. One short gasp and the gentle boy sank back dead. Norman Vivian in the heyday of his youth passed away from this world's troubles to that blessed world where we all hope to go. Earth knew him no more. Silenced for ever was his clear voice, hushed the springing footstep that had once sounded frequently to loving ears. Norman Vivian was dead. But he lives in one heart yet, and will do so long as that heart breathes.

CHAPTER XVI.

For a few minutes Muriel stood by the bedside, dumb, motionless, she could not realize her sorrow. Spence took her by the hand to lead her from the bed. It was useless, she would not go.

"Go to the window and look out," suggested Nurse, anything was better than that silent hopeless agony.

Muriel went. Again she looked at the moon. How peaceful and still; was Norman's spirit soaring above it—higher—higher, Muriel wondered this with a dull wonder. The Park lay bathed in silvery light. Trees stood out casting their shadows around. All was peace. What a lovely night in which to die. And inside the room save for the sad aching of one desolate heart, was a greater, nobler, more solemn peace; the hush and awe that the king of terrors always leaves in inexplicable mysteriousness. Death was conqueror; he had succeeded in snatching life away. He had grappled successfully with his victim, he had laid low the high yet earthly ambitions of the gifted boy. He had robbed him of his bloom, and clothed him in an earthly shroud that none could throw off. But what then? There his triumph ended. What mattered it that he had left the poor worth-

less clay proof of his power. In all his cruel work he could not touch the glorious spirit that the shell had but so poorly covered. He had but loosed it from its earthly tabernacle glad of its release. He had left it free to rise to heights of endless bliss, far far away where sin and suffering are not known. Dear reader may we not pause to ask why do we grudge our dear beloved ones this glorious life? Why do we long to keep them fettered down below to darkness and gloom? Why do we not stifle our cry and let them go without one lament? We loved them so, we answer. Aye, truly, we did love them so, their every look, and gesture, and word wound them round our hearts, and they were clasped there until it shook us to the very centre to part. All the more reason we should wish them to go. Greater the need for self-abnegation. Is anything too good for those whom we love so dearly? No. Can any greater reward be obtained than heaven? No. Then let them go. Strive with bated breath and hushed hearts to be *glad* at their departure, to *rejoice* and *sing*, looking forward to the time when after a long fight we may rejoin them nevermore to part; refined, purified to be meet partakers of heaven. As Muriel stood by the window some such thoughts as these were hers. The blow had but just fallen, and her first feelings were more of Norman's gain than of her own dreary desolate position. She could be scarcely said to

feel in the first overwhelming crush of a heavy blow, she mused rather. There was a weight on her heart, but it was scarcely pain, rather a load that she wished to lift, and wondered why she could not. Nurse came to her.

"Will you come and close your brother's eyes," asked she. "I think you had better do it."

Muriel went, she displayed neither emotion nor feeling. In fact she behaved altogether like an automaton.

Mr. Duerdon entered the room. He was strangly unnerved.

"My precious boy," he said, in deep grief, "I would have given nearly all I possessed to keep you. You had a noble nature, a gifted mind, and you were one in whom truly there was no guile."

He stooped and kissed the marble forehead. Muriel resented it. For the first time since her brother died she spoke.

"Leave him alone," she wailed, "he was my Norman, mine"—

"He was, dear girl; he was your brother, you were both my sister Millicent's children. I love you both. Come away now, dear Norman no longer needs you, his pain has all gone."

He expected to see the pale weary girl burst into a flood of tears, but no, she had repressed them so long they would not come now. She moaned aloud once.

"Poor Muriel," said Mr. Duerdon, pityingly.

"Come away, this is no place for you," and he took her hand.

"Speak quietly, hush. I will come," she said. She staggered, and would have fallen, Mr. Duerdon caught her.

"Poor child, poor stray lamb," he said. "It has been a weary time to thee. May God be merciful. You must be our care now."

He put his arm protectingly round the girl, and drew her from the room.

"Miss Muriel is in a bad way," muttered Spence to herself. "I feel sorry for her. Poor Master Norman," and she wiped away a tear.

So Muriel left the room with her dead. Never again when she entered it would Norman's bright smile and winsome look greet her in glad welcome. Never again! no never again! all that happy time had passed away. Mr. Duerdon almost carried the crushed heart-broken girl into her room. Sarah was sitting by the fire—nearly asleep. She had had directions to stay there. He awakened her. With Mr. Duerdon's help she lifted the now almost unconscious girl on the bed, and covered her over with a rug and shawl. Mr. Duerdon went downstairs to fetch a glass of wine. He was some time gone and was much surprised on his return to find Muriel asleep.

"Strange," he soliloquised, "exceedingly strange. I have heard of similar instances. Trouble must have touched her brain. Stay with

her, Sarah," he whispered, "be careful of her and let me know if she wakens before I come in the morning."

But there was no fear. Muriel seemed to have fallen into the stupor that had oppressed Norman so long. It was not until two o'clock the next day that she aroused out of it. She recollected in an instant that Norman was dead. With a deep-drawn moan she got off the bed and staggered to his room. The door was locked but the key was in. She turned it and entered. There, as if still asleep, lay Norman, quiet and still, with a smile hovering over the face.

"Nor, Nor, my darling," she wailed, "I have come to sit with you. We can be together a little longer yet."

She took hold of the hand, cold and stiff; no longer able to respond to her touch, she pushed back the hair from off the high massive forehead, and there he lay with closed eyes, the faded looks gone, the bright ones returned. Had the spirit in loving pity come back and cast a spell over the shell where it once dwelt? Or in passing away did it unconsciously shine and linger, leaving the glimmer of it to cheer and comfort the sorrowing ones? Muriel sat until she fancied almost that Norman was breathing. She talked to him softly, slowly, but never waited for an answer. How long she had been there she never knew. Mr. Duerdon found her. He was angry that no one had kept watch over her proceedings.

"You must come and have food," he observed, and took her by the hand.

She went away passively, but no food could they get her to eat. Mr. Duerdon was in sad doubt and perplexity as to what was best to be done with her. Mrs. Duerdon was perfectly useless. Full of affected grief, and moved more by anxiety for fashionable and stylish mourning than of thoughts for any one else's welfare, she was as far as Muriel was concerned a nonentity at this period. And there was no other suitable person. It was simply impossible for Mr. Duerdon to be continually with the bereaved girl. He did his best, but it was not sufficient, and the consequence was Muriel was left to her own devices. She was nearly always in Norman's room, hour after hour she spent there, if Mr. Duerdon succeeded one minute in drawing her away she was back the next. And it seemed cruel to interfere. Mr. Duerdon decided that the funeral must be hastened. This fearful state of things must give way. And so far Muriel had not shed one tear since Norman's death. Not one drop had relieved the aching brow.

On Friday morning when Muriel went as usual to keep her watch, she found her brother moved off the bed and laid in his coffin. This seemed to move her greatly.

"Oh, Nor, they have moved you, they are going to take you away. What shall I do? how shall I bear it then?"

And she covered her face with her hands.

"I must have some beautiful flowers," she said at length. "If Mrs. Duerdon will not let me have the best in the hothouses, Douglas must go over to Jycliffe for them. Mr. Mervin will pay for them. My money has been but little use to him so far"—

The door opened and Ernest Mervin and Alan Murray walked in.

Muriel stared at them.

"You have no right here," she exclaimed, angrily. "Norman does not want to see you,"

Alan would have taken her hand in tender pity. She snatched it away and went out of the room. When she returned they had gone.

"Ah, we are alone again once more," said Muriel, going up and standing by the coffin. "It is hard they should part us now that our time together is so short."

A noise disturbed her. She looked round. It was Major.

"The head gardener has sent these flowers, Miss Muriel, for you. He is keeping the others to make the wreaths and cross with."

She held a beautiful bouquet in her hand. Muriel took them.

"You can go, Major," she said, "these will do."

But outside the door the maid lingered.

"Pretty perishable flowers," murmured Muriel. "White—emblem of purity—not so white and

pure as Norman. Oh, Nor, how could you leave me," she exclaimed, in a burst of sorrow. "I would not have treated you so. Come back, darling, let us spend our happy days together as we did before you were ill. Let us forget that dreadful, dreadful time, and be once more as we used to be. Do, do come back."

There was a pause, a long sad pause, and Major listened intently. The pathos, the entreaty that sounded so mournfully in Muriel's voice quite touched Major.

"What a thing it is," she said to herself, "that there's no one anywhere to see after Miss Muriel. It does seem sad she's all her sorrow to bear alone. I almost wish I could do something, I wonder Mr. Duerdon don't send for some one, but there, there's no one that I know of to send for."

Muriel's voice interrupted her soliloquy.

"You do look beautiful, Nor," said the desolate girl, "just as you used to look before you went to join the angels. Oh, if you won't come back, darling, stay with me like this. I will be satisfied. I do not want anything else only to be always with you. Speak one word—just one. Let me once more hear your glad voice as I used to hear it. Hush!"

She raised herself on tiptoe in the excitement of expectancy. She had worked herself up to a high pitch. Her breath came and went in short gasps. Her hands were clasped to pain in the

intensity of emotion, and yet Norman lay still—motionless—unmoved.

"You will never, never speak to me again," moaned Muriel. "I know it now—never again"—

And with one deep groan that seemed to come from the very depths of her heart, poor Muriel fell senseless on the floor. Some of the pretty flowers lying scattered round her.

CHAPTER XVII.

Major called loudly for help, and in a few minutes Muriel was lifted on to her own bed. In the midst of the commotion caused by this, a summons was sent upstairs for her to go to the drawing-room.

A lady had called to see her—the Honourable Mrs. Murray, of Stonecourt—Alan's mother.

A message was returned, saying—

"Miss Muriel was too ill to come."

Mrs. Duerdon did not credit the information, she thought it was an excuse of Muriel's, a distaste for seeing strangers just then. Such behaviour could not be tolerated. So *in propria personne* she hastened up the stairs.

"Such a great honour as Mrs. Murray has conferred on the girl," murmured Mrs. Duerdon, "and for her not to appreciate it. I should not be doing my duty were I to weakly give way."

But she found alas that Muriel was really unconscious, it was no idle tale. Mrs. Murray waited some time, but as there was no improvement, she drove away, leaving her kind love and Alan's for the poor girl.

Muriel rose greatly in Mrs. Duerdon's estimation for this attention, but unfortunately she was not aware of it.

Mr. Shaw was sent for, but could not do anything; he said it was a stupor caused by grief.

In cases like this where the mourner did not shed tears and relieve the brain great harm was sometimes done.

She stayed so until Sunday. She knew nothing of all that was going on. Not anything even of Norman's funeral. All was as a closed book to her. It was perhaps a mercy that it should be so, a mercy that she had a short respite of trouble at the time when it lay heaviest. But on Sunday, the first Sunday morning that she had ever spent without Norman, she lay in danger. Mr. Shaw looked very grave. He feared more for her reason than for her life. Her hair was all cropped close, her face attenuated and thin, and there she lay unconscious of it all. In a deep dreamless sleep or stupor, that was fearful from its long continuation.

Mrs. Duerdon was grieved and upset now.

"It seems as if we are going to lose them both," she exclaimed in dismay, "I do not like Muriel—she is not nice like handsome Norman was, but I should not like her to die in this dreadful way."

Conscience was tapping at Mrs. Duerdon's breast just then. If she could not blame herself for unkindness to Norman she certainly could not congratulate herself on her justice to Muriel. And sweeping about in the magnificence and state of new and expensive mourning all her dislike to the orphan girl vanished.

"I hope she will get better," she said anxiously, "I will try to like her better in the future. She

used to try me greatly, but after Norman's death and this visitation, I must look upon her differently."

Owen was kept in ignorance of Muriel's unconsciousness.

Mr. Duerdon moved about an altered man—his hair tinged with grey—his face furrowed and marked with care.

"I join in your anxiety," he owned, "as to Muriel's recovery, but as far as I am concerned I would rather she died than lost her reason. Clara—can you acquit yourself as to blame in the case. Is your conscience quite clear. Did you do all in your power to soothe and comfort the girl's sorrow. Did you take care that she was never left alone and was your"—

"There you are Fred, just as usual, trying to put all the blame on me," exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon irritably. "Why! do you consider yourself blameless."

"No, Clara, I do not," he almost groaned. "I have been weak and irresolute, but I shall err in that way no longer. God grant that my atonement may not come too late."

"Well, you are simple at any rate," returned Mrs. Duerdon, with more truth than politeness. "Were my conscience as clear as yours, I would hold myself up proudly."

Spence had gone home directly after Norman's death, and a hired nurse had to be sent for. She, with all her experience, wondered how it would end. She had never witnessed a similar case.

On Sunday afternoon Muriel threw off her lethargy, or whatever other name her unconsciousness might be called by. Mr. Duerdon sat by the fire in her room reading his Bible, and Mrs. Duerdon in great unrest was in and out of the room. On her return for about the sixth time she made rather a noise; the door creaked. She glanced towards Muriel, and saw that she opened her eyes.

"Look, Fred!" she exclaimed in excitement, "Muriel is conscious!"

Mrs. Duerdon had a bunch of violets in a vase; she held them up. Muriel lay perfectly passive, but she looked as Mrs. Duerdon's voice reached her, and her eyes rested on the violets.

"Oh, Norman, Norman," she burst out in grief. "Those violets do remind me of you. How often you gathered them for me, and now I have no one. You always brought me the earliest," and Muriel fell into a violent fit of crying. Deep sobs shook her frame, her grief was excessive.

"Do not on any account seek to stop her crying," remarked Mr. Duerdon to the nurse, who was anxiously trying to soothe.

"Oh, but, sir," dissented the woman, "she is so weak, I fear the consequences. She has cried enough."

"Mr. Shaw said if she did not break out into a good fit of tears before twenty-four hours were over that the results he feared would be both sad and fatal."

"And she may yet sink from weakness, sir; exhaustion, if great care is not taken."

Mr. Duerdon went to the distressed girl, and sitting down by her side took one hand which lay outside the counterpane into his.

"You must try and be brave, Muriel dear," he said, kindly, "for all our sakes. We are suffering great anxiety on your account."

"What day is it?" she asked.

"Sunday," he replied.

"Is Norman—is my brother—buried?"

"Yes dear; it was yesterday, it was all for the best."

She said nothing further. The nurse brought her some food, but she scarcely touched it.

Mr. Shaw proved invaluable at this time. His real character came out. He was kind and gentlemanly. No one would have given him credit for so much tenderness, unless it might have been Norman, had he been alive to add his testimony. He was gentle in his manner, yet very firm. Muriel was greatly reduced, and he brought her round with tact and management. She took it into her head that she would not eat—she would starve herself to death. Mr. Shaw divined her motive, and mastered her intentions. It was some weeks before she could go downstairs, and she shrank from any suggestion of being moved. She preferred her own bedroom she said. As soon as she was strong enough to be taken down, however, Mr. Shaw insisted on the change. Then it was

that the full burden of her loss came on her. At every turn she was reminded of her desolation. Each book and flower, each chair and room, recalled Norman vividly. She could not turn her head without some incident of his vanished boyhood appearing before her. She could not stir without finding traces of his presence. From morning until night her heart cried out bitterly, "Oh for the sunshine of his smile, the sound of his voice, once more." Mrs. Murray sent over several times to inquire how she was, and Alan wrote little notes of sympathy from Harrow. He said that his mother was obliged to leave home shortly, but that on her return Muriel would have to go and stay at Stonecourt, and that under Mrs. Murray's kind treatment life would gain a brighter hue, sorrow a less weary grief. Both Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon were considerate to Muriel. She received no harsh words, no unpleasant looks, no unjust reprimands, but this would not bring Norman back. Owen, for whom a governess had been engaged, followed Muriel like her shadow when released from school duties. He tried to be kind as Norman used to be, and could not bear to see her cry. But the days wore on, and Muriel's sorrow did not lessen. She had grown into a weary, listless, wandering way, she was always idle. Every day she strolled to Norman's grave, sometimes more than once; there she would sit for hours. Mr. Duerdon objected strongly to this way of going on. He would have liked to have heard

her play the piano, and sing, but her sweet voice was never heard save now and then when talking in low tones. The fact was she had never entered the schoolroom since the twenty-fifth day of March, the day after Norman's birthday. She shrank from going there with the greatest dread.

Mr. Duerdon consulted with Mr. Shaw as to the expediency of taking her to the seaside. The medical man deliberated.

"Are her studies going on at present?" he inquired.

"No, she has no governess. Do you consider her well enough for lessons?" replied Mr. Duerdon, surprised.

"Most decidedly," was the emphatic answer. "I tell you what, Duerdon, would be the best thing; may I speak out?"

"Unreservedly, by all means."

"Send her to school, let her have companionship and study, this will rouse her."

"The very thing," exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon, with fervour. "It will improve her greatly too; make her more like other girls."

"I do not consider that desirable myself," said Mr. Shaw, significantly. "I think there is something inexpressibly winning about her manner, a charm both the Vivians seemed to possess. Duerdon, will you send her to school? It may dispel this sorrow, this dark gloom that seems to be oppressing her."

Mr. Duerdon hesitated. "I do not altogether

approve of the notion," he owned. "I scarcely like letting her out of our sight."

"There is nothing like companionship for every one," urged Mr. Shaw. "Young people should be with young people."

And in the end he got his way. They heard of an excellent school at Leamington, kept by a widow lady, a niece of Mr. Shaw's, a Mrs. Clementi Coleman; a refined, cultured gentlewoman, one in every respect fitted to undertake the education of youth. She felt great sympathy for Muriel when she heard all the particulars, and promised to be a mother to the doubly orphaned and bereaved girl. Muriel had no idea of the changes that were going to take place in her home. She went on in the same idle, listless way. One day Mrs. Duerdon undertook to tell her. Mr. Duerdon had his doubts as to whether she would take pains to break the tidings gently. He fancied Muriel would be distressed to leave Astley and Norman's grave.

"You must be careful to speak kindly, Clara, and if she objects we must engage a governess and keep her at home."

"I shall use my own discretion," answered Mrs. Duerdon, loftily. "You know well that I am now as anxious for her welfare as you could possibly be."

"Well, Clara, I will trust you. I believe you will do your best."

So one fine afternoon in May Mrs. Duerdon swept the corridors with her long, trailing black

garments, rich and handsomely trimmed, on to Muriel's bedroom. She thought she would find her there, and she was not mistaken. Muriel sat near the window doing nothing. She looked like a pale ghost, that is if a ghost could wear a mourning dress and have large sorrowful eyes, which seemed as if all life had died out of them. Mrs. Duerdon kissed the fragile girl, not fondly, not formally exactly—lightly rather. But it was a great thing for her to kiss at all, it was a condescension, a concession, an honour, if only taken as such. Muriel did not seem to notice it. She did not return the caress but neither did she resent it.

"I want you to come to the schoolroom with me, Muriel," remarked Mrs. Duerdon, assuming a carelessness she was far from feeling.

Muriel shuddered. "I could not go there, Mrs. Duerdon," she answered quietly, "Anywhere in the house rather than that where Norman—where I used to be so happy."

"And will be again, I hope," said Mrs. Duerdon

"Never again."

"I have had it altered, Muriel. The furniture is differently arranged, and some fresh added. I should like you to come and see it. Major has put some flowers there too."

"Very kind of her," murmured Muriel, indifferently, "but thank you, Mrs. Duerdon, I will not go, please do not ask me."

Mrs. Duerdon stood perplexed. She really wanted to be kind, but Muriel's persistency annoyed her. She stood irresolute.

"Do you think Muriel, you are right in this obstinate avoidance of the schoolroom?" she asked at last. "Is it kind, think you, to Norman's memory?"

Muriel looked up startled, this was a new way in which to regard her behaviour.

"Kind to Norman!" she repeated.

"I scarcely think he would feel flattered if he could see you," proceeded Mrs. Duerdon. "He loved to be there. Surely he would feel hurt if he saw how little you prize what his presence should have rendered so dear."

Mrs. Duerdon spoke rather shrilly, but her manner was kinder than Muriel ever remembered it.

"Doubtless you are right," replied Muriel. "Please go on, I will overtake you shortly."

She waited a few moments to fortify herself. Instead of going straight to the schoolroom, however, Mrs. Duerdon waited about until she thought Muriel would have had time to reach there, and then joined her. The sofa on which Norman used to lie was wheeled away from the fireplace and placed against a wall. Mrs. Duerdon found Muriel kneeling against it convulsed with grief. Even Mrs. Duerdon felt strange. She thought of the time when she had seen Norman there last, and of how he had petitioned on behalf of her kindness

towards his sister. And there was that sister needing a consoling word now. Should she withhold it. Not if she knew how to give it, but sympathy was new to Mrs. Duerdon. She did her best.

"Muriel," she said, and if her tone was again shrill, she did not mean it unkindly, "you must give over crying. Norman would not like it."

Muriel looked up quickly, the right chord was touched.

"No," she said, "I remember I promised him I would be brave, but oh, it is so hard when everything keeps reminding one of—his—his presence."

"Would you like to go away from home for a time," questioned Mrs. Duerdon, cautiously.

"I scarcely know," was the weary reply. "I scarcely think I should."

"How do you think you would like to go to school?" said Mrs. Duerdon, and she unfolded the Leamington scheme.

"I should not like it, but I think it would be the best thing for me," replied Muriel, after due thought. "Yes, I believe it would help to sweeten my sorrow."

"Bravely spoken, Muriel," declared Mr. Duerdon, who at that moment entered the room. "A year or two at school is recommended by Mr. Shaw. He is very interested in you. Now, will you grant me a favour—will you—do not think me unkind—will you sing to me, I long to hear your voice again?"

Muriel's face quivered. "I scarcely know," she answered, timidly, "I am afraid I shall break down."

"Never mind if you do, try your best, I shall be satisfied."

Muriel looked very wistfully at him; she longed for a reprieve if only of one day, but Mr. Duerdon did not notice the hesitation. She got up and went to the piano and struck a few chords. A tide of recollections swept over her, but she conquered them, and soon her voice rang out. It was weaker than of yore, but not any the less sweet, and Mr. Duerdon thought to himself, "She has gained one more victory over her trouble, she will get all right when she goes to school."

A week later Muriel started for her new home in Leamington, much to Owen's grief.

"Do not send her away, papa," he implored, "Norman's gone and Muriel will soon be gone, and I shall be so lonely."

"Muriel will come back," answered Mr. Duerdon cheerfully, "she is going to be made quite clever and grow up a lady."

"Oh," said the little fellow, disconsolately, "do not let her be a lady."

"Then she will perhaps be sending you a letter some day, Owen. Who knows but that she will be sending you more than one."

"Will she?" exclaimed the child, in delight, "and will it be all my very own?"

"Decidedly."

"Oh, then she may go, papa. She may leave here to-morrow, and I shall look out for the post bag every day."

Muriel paid a visit to Norman's grave the night before her departure. She had made a beautiful wreath to place there.

"I am going away from your last earthly resting-place for a time, Nor," she said, gazing up into the clouds, "but I am not leaving you behind. You will watch over me as much at school as here, I know." She found it hard to tear herself from the grave. Dusk was creeping on ere she thought of turning her feet homewards. As she was leaving the churchyard she turned to take her last look at the beautiful cross which she had erected to his memory. It was splendidly carved, and bore the following inscription:—

Sacred to the Beloved Memory
of
NORMAN VIVIAN,
Only Son of Rev. Norman and Millicent Vivian,
Died April 7th, 1863.
Aged 17 Years.
"The will of the Lord be done."

There had been some little difficulty with Mr. Duerdon as to whom should erect a monument to Norman's memory. He insisted that he had the right to do it. Muriel would not give way. She said it was the only thing she could do for her brother. Her money had hitherto been useless—she must do something. Mr. Mervin backed all

her arguments, more especially as Norman's legacy came to her by Norman's express wish. Muriel gained her way. But Mr. Duerdon, at his own expense, caused the grave to be railed round and pretty flowers set inside the railings, and the girl was satisfied.

The Mervins were exceedingly glad that Muriel was going to school. They sympathised deeply with her in her sorrow, but were helpless to relieve. Mrs. Duerdon would not suffer them to see her.

Five years passed away without anything of great importance happening. Muriel spent two years at school and returned home an accomplished young lady. She made no friends there—perhaps she did not try. Her time was passed in study and in grieving for the loss of the brother whom she had loved so dearly. Hers was a nature that never forgot a trouble. The intensity of her grief of course grew smaller, but never so long as she lived would Muriel Vivian cease to bewail Norman's death. She was but little altered outwardly after five years had passed over her head. Twenty-one, yet girlish-looking, more, perhaps, in her movements and manners than in the face. It was full of grave earnestness. Any one looking there might read truth and trustfulness in every line. A reliable, steadfast character was Muriel. It was a lovely day in June, mild, balmy, fragrant. Lilacs and laburnums waved gracefully, stirred by the gentle breeze. All nature rejoiced in the sunshine. Grass ready to be mown, long and wavy,

grew golden in patches, perhaps where the buttercups congregated together. Flowers outvied with each other as to fragrance and beauty, and over all the blue sky shone down in approving harmony. Scarcely a cloud to be seen. Norman had been dead five years and two months; the moss had grown round his tomb, its newness had passed away. Summer and autumn, winter and spring succeeded each other in unvarying order, but they made no difference to the gentle boy. His bones lay smouldering away, his body rotting, waiting for the general resurrection.

Five long years! A weary time to look forward to, a mere nothing to look back upon. How quickly gone! how rapidly fled! To Muriel even the time had been short. Strange, perhaps, that it should be so, yet not strange in one way. Though Norman's presence was no longer with her she often felt as if he were very near. Her thoughts and dreams were ever of him, continually, incessantly, until there were times when she really felt as if he were by her side. She felt thus the June morning when the thread of the tale is taken up again. She stood at the dining-room window, the very one where we first saw her, gazing out on the Park with dreamy eyes. The broad velvety expanse swept before her. No snow to sober the eyes as there had been that long-ago afternoon. Trees, instead of being leafless and bare, were robed in verdant green. The scene outside was as different as it was possible for two pictures to be.

Things if less chastely beautiful were more joyously so. Nature was in her most amiable mood. Muriel contrasted the two times, and as she stood there you may take a peep at her. Well rounded in figure, but small, scarcely of medium height, and very neat and orderly. Her face was but little altered. Stouter, perhaps, and therefore less long, fuller of expression; no prettier than before, yet an attractive, winning face, that could not fail to please.

She had left off her sombre mourning attire, and was dressed in a delicate dress of pale blue, next to white, her favourite colour. At the neck and wrists she wore costly lace; very fond of good lace was Muriel, yet not fonder of dress than of old. She was always well robed, yet never in the height of fashion—the texture better than the cut. Very grave was the face looking on to the Park. Not watching for Norman; no, for Norman was resting peacefully; no more would his bounding footstep crush the grass under his feet; no more dreaded walks would he have to make from Jycliffe; no fear of snow giving him cold. No. Muriel no longer *feared* for her brother; all thoughts of him were crowned with hope. They had many years to spend together in the bright hereafter—bliss unending, joy inextinguishable—a glorious life for ever and ever. A few troubles, a few joys more or less, the crossing the dark valley, and they would be together once more never to be parted. As

yet no other dreams had arisen to make earth bright. But one thing was certain, however happy Muriel's future might be, it would never make her forget the hope of the life that had to come. Ineffaceable the recollections of Norman's long weary illness—his own patience, fortitude and endurance —her desolation and bereavement. She thought of these things, and before them of the gentle boyhood, the noble goodness, the gracious obedience which had all along marked Norman. How bright must be the crown he had won! She mused on the future they had planned together. What prospects they had arranged and woven together. Aye, as we all weave and arrange, and often, alas! with only the same results. But while Muriel gazed outwardly, and mused on all these things, a change suddenly passed over her face, her eyes sparkled, a flush rose into her cheeks. She turned hastily from the window, only for an instant; with a little dignified toss of the head that suited her well she turned back again. A gentleman on horseback, handsome and prepossessing, was riding down the avenue. Muriel watched him on the gravel just in front of the doorway, watched him gravely and sedately. Just a smile crossed her lips as she bowed in recognition of his raised hat. It was Alan Murray.

Alan had nobly kept his promise to Norman. He and Muriel were fast friends. None firmer than they.

"I am glad Alan has ridden over to-day," soliloquised Muriel. "I feared he might find it too hot; besides he was here yesterday."

She turned away from the window. The massive and old-fashioned furniture made the dining-room look gloomy after the bright sunshine outside. But Muriel did not mind it, she was not going to stay there. On into the drawing-room walked she ready to receive Alan. It was empty. Mrs. Duerdon had gone out in the carriage. A few minutes and Alan entered unannounced. Perfectly at home there was free-and-easy Alan.

"That fellow Douglas gets sharp about taking my horse," he remarked, taking Muriel's extended hand. "I believe he is always looking out for me."

"Yet you have been rather long, Alan, in crossing the hall."

"Not so, Murie, it was all Parkyn's fault. We ran into collision, and I nearly knocked him down. The man must be getting old—blind or in his dotage. His excess of politeness is something fearful."

Muriel laughed.

"You have just hit it," she said. "Parkyn is the essence of politeness; is in fact respect itself."

"Well, I think I have cured him this time. Our heads went pretty hard together. If Parkyn's is harder than mine I will forgive him. Poor fellow, he would come off worst."

And Alan laughed aloud in merriment at the recollection. Muriel joined in quietly.

"Poor Parkyn," she remarked, "I believe he would scarcely mind his head, so distressed would he be at the thought that he had not rendered you sufficient civility. Not only omitted one of his most punctilious attentions of opening the door and announcing in his pompous voice 'Mr. Murray,' but also having assaulted you. Alan, do not you think you ought to go and speak to him. Set him all right."

"My dear Murie, the absurdity. If I had broken his head—well then perhaps—but now, oh no. Does the solemn fellow expect me to wait whilst he marches on in dumb stately pomp before me. Two strides across the hall and I should be here."

Alan sank into a chair to the detriment of its springs. Tall, stalwart, strong was he. Joyous and full of life, as one who had known no care. His face was ruddy with exposure to the air, his eyes as blue as the sky above. His laugh frequent and ringing. A good master was Alan, with open yet gentlemanly manners. Indolent as he had been over his studies, there was no lack of energy shown in the management of his estates. Since the death of his father some years ago, he had been altogether with his mother's help his own steward. A rare athlete had Alan turned out. In all outdoor sports he excelled. At college, he had not distinguished himself, not in honours at least: he had not tried for them. No fonder of brain-

work was he than in Norman's time, not that he wanted intellect. Far from it. But he required application. Life lay very bright before him.

"Where's madam, Murie?"

"Gone to make some calls. She will be back to lunch."

"What made her go in the morning?"

"Deponent sayeth not," answered Muriel. "Fancy, taste, or any of the hundred and one ideas that may influence Mrs. Duerdon."

"Long may she stay," breathed Alan, fervently.

"Alan, for shame," reproved Muriel, "you get worse and worse, indeed you do. You are not just to Aunt Clara."

"Well, now, Murie," said Alan, fixing his merry blue eye full on her, "confess, honestly mind. Do you not wish the same thing, only you are afraid to say it?"

Muriel looked down. Alan's eyes twinkled.

"No, I do not," she said, after some deliberation. "It is very nice, chatting without her, of course, but then I am afraid of her getting ill if she stays in the sun too long. She is altered very much, Alan. She really is another person since dear Norman died. So much—much nicer."

"Nicer, oh, I almost thought you were going to say the other thing. Yet still I do not think that that would be possible. For she was bad enough in all conscience one time."

"How did you know that?" asked Muriel, quickly.

"Umph! That is my secret, but I did learn it somewhere."

"Never from me, Alan."

"No, Murie, never from you. Set your conscientious little heart at rest."

"Well, she is much improved," repeated Muriel.

"I am glad to hear it. Perhaps it would puzzle her to become worse. There was plenty of room for amendment. Easily might she become a great deal better and yet not be particularly nice."

"Alan, for shame."

"So she might, and improve as much as ever she could, she would not be any great shakes. Still must she be Mrs. Duerdon, small-minded, narrow, mean, and"—

"Yet one time, Alan, if you remember, you admired her greatly. At our first party here on Norman's birthday."

"Ah, I was young and foolish then," replied Alan, complacently. "I have seen the error of my ways since. I do not admire Mrs. Duerdon now."

"Do you know what she says?"

"Who says?"

"Mrs. Duerdon," answered Muriel, in a low tone.

"Anything that is outlandish and improbable. Nothing sensible and sound. The idea of asking any one to guess what she said."

"It was silly of me," owned Muriel. "I should have put it differently."

"Oh, no, you should not," contradicted Alan. "Murie, I beg your pardon. I am not polite this morning somehow." Then in a lower tone he went on, "I brought the flowers for dear Norman's grave, Muriel, and they look beautiful."

"Did you put them there yourself, Alan?"

"I did."

"Thank you very much," she said, gently, "I will go and look at them by-and-bye. Are you staying to luncheon?"

"Sorry to say I cannot. My mother has some visitors, and she requested my presence. Caroline Danvers is one that I have to help to amuse. She has grown a lovely girl, Murie."

"Has she?" inquired Muriel, indifferently, "she is coming to live at the Vicarage I heard. Since kind Mrs. Mervin's death, two years ago, they have been sadly in want of some one. Her death was very sudden, Alan."

"Very, inflammation often causes sudden death."

Muriel nodded her head.

"Do you care for Caroline?" inquired Alan, abruptly.

"I almost forget; we used to be friends, but that was when Norman was alive, and I—I wanted no friends." There was a quiver in the sweet voice.

"No, of course not. Murie, you must have no friends but me, now!"

"Why not?" she asked, wonderingly.

"Because we can talk best about Norman, he loved us both."

"Yes, but Alan, I do not think he meant I was to have no other friend. He knew Carrie, too, and I think he liked her, he was always kind."

"So he would be to any one. He never liked her, and you will not. She is too vain and frivolous."

"I shall try," was the grave answer.

"Oh, very well," was his huffed retort. "If you are going to pick up with every one in the whole country round I will throw your friendship up!"

Muriel did not speak, but tears came in her eyes. Alan jumped up quickly.

"Now have I been and wounded you?" he asked, penitently. "I did not mean to do. Forgive me, Muny, forgive me, my little friend."

"Not that name then, Alan," she implored.

He had said Muny. She allowed no one to call her that now. Alan's usual cognomen was Murie.

"Well, Murie," he said, taking her hands and looking very lovingly at her with his merry blue eyes. "You have not told me yet what *she* said. Was it something about yourself?"

Muriel looked puzzled for a minute.

"Oh, I remember," she answered. "I was asking Mrs. Duerdon what had changed her so much, what had made her so thoughtful and different."

Alan screwed his face up in disbelief. Not dis-

belief at Muriel's statement, merely incredulity at the great change in Mrs. Duerdon's behaviour.

"Well, what did her ladyship reply? Did she accept the praise as if it were her due?"

"She said it was all owing to dear Norman," answered Muriel, in a low tone. "She said he had done much for her in his life, but a great deal more by his death. It seems shortly before he died he begged her—dear good Nor—to be kind to me. She was bewailing her hard lines in being burdened with us, and Norman told her he believed God had sent us to her as blessings."

"And doubtless so He did," agreed Alan. "It was brave of Norman telling her so though."

"She quite thinks he was right," continued Muriel, softly. "She says we have been the greatest blessings any children could have been. She is sorry for all past injustices now."

"Very fine," retorted Alan, "but that will not restore Norman."

"No, certainly not; but I think if Nor can behold the change he will be glad. She had nothing to do with his dying."

"I do not know that. He was a very sensitive boy; he felt her unkindness to you much. I would not acquit her."

"But you must, Alan, indeed you must," entreated Muriel, earnestly. "Norman had a happy nature. He was happy and glad all his life, and I do not wonder that his influence has wrought such

a change on Mrs. Duerdon. She is as nice as she can be."

"I am glad you qualify your praise, Mrs. Duerdon's best is very poor."

"No one can be better than is in their power. Oh, Alan! be just."

"Don Ferdinando—can't do more than he can do," whistled Alan.

"No, you are right; from small hearts you must expect small deeds, from large hearts large ones. Here is the carriage returning. You will stay and speak to Mrs. Duerdon, she likes to see you."

Alan made a wry face but stayed. To witness the meeting between him and Mrs. Duerdon it might have been thought that they were the greatest friends. The effusion and fuss were certainly all on the lady's side, but Alan received it with outward pleasure. Perhaps Master Alan was a little bit crafty—just a little bit. He knew, as the common people say, on which side his bread was buttered. To see the younger lady daily, and to receive a glad welcome from the elder one suited his purpose better than to be rebuffed by her.

"You will stay to luncheon, Alan?" remarked Mrs. Duerdon, politely, "Mr. Duerdon will be home then."

"Thanks, no, I cannot, my mother has visitors."

"Let them wait a while. You cannot possibly reach Stonecourt by that meal. You shall leave directly our luncheon is ended."

"Oh, a glass of wine and biscuit would have done well enough for me," returned Alan.

Nevertheless he stayed. Perhaps a look from Muriel decided him—more probably still, his inclinations veered too strongly towards Astley and one inhabitant there to need either look or persuasion. Mr. Duerdon was pleased to see him. Time had dealt leniently with that gentleman. He looked scarcely a day older. His face had lost much of its sharpness, it wore a happier, less careworn look.

Directly luncheon was concluded Alan prepared for departure.

"You will accompany me, Muriel, to the lodge as usual?" he asked. "Douglas will lead my horse on."

Muriel got a large hat and umbrella and joined him.

"We can take our time," remarked Alan. "It is very hot for you Muriel. You will not visit the grave until this evening, will you?"

"I never do now, Alan," replied Muriel, smiling up at him. "It is so much pleasanter in the cool of the evening."

Muriel, like Norman, had the sweetest smile, only with her it was much rarer. It lighted up the face marvellously whilst it lasted; transformed the features, and made an observant beholder wait patiently until the next sunbeam came. Alan was always pleased to see Muriel smile. He returned her glance lovingly.

"I shall be glad when our company leaves, Muriel. We seem to see so little of each other."

"I do not know," she replied. "You are very good about coming; you come most days."

"Do you care whether I come or not?" inquired Alan. "I sometimes fear that you are indifferent about it. You always look the same, so calm and self-possessed."

"Oh, Alan!" she replied reproachfully. "Not pleased to see my friends? What a dreadful accusation. I am always pleased to see you."

"Yet how quietly you speak. Would you care if I did not come for a fortnight, Murie? Would it make any difference?"

"The time would be long, Alan. I should be very sorry."

And so they talked. Douglas was waiting when they reached the lodge. He touched his hat respectfully and disappeared as quickly as he could. Muriel was not many minutes behind him.

"Alan is a dear good friend," she mused, walking slowly homewards. "I wonder what I should do without him? Is Carrie nice? I hope so. She is sure to be a lovely girl too. Perhaps he will marry her. If so I hope she will like me. I should miss Alan's friendship very very much. No one could talk to me about Norman as he does. No one else seems to remember so much of dear Nor's school life. How different Alan is to Norman in his disposition, so much more impetuous

and strong-willed, but still he is very kind. Heigho!"

That was a heavy sigh that proceeded deep from Muriel's heart. She scarcely knew the depth of it; neither was she at all conscious of its cause. A brief sleep of ignorance ere the unrest of wakefulness came to disturb her repose.

Does the reader wonder what had become of Owen? He was away at school. The governess that Mrs. Duerdon engaged for him turned out most unsatisfactory, unprincipled, vain and idle, and Owen ran wild. He mixed indiscriminately with the village children; went birds'-nesting and tore his clothes; climbed trees, and became one of the roughest boys for miles round. This might not have harmed him, but he learned to swear, to tell lies, and to be deceitful in many ways. Timid little Owen became quite a changed character. And how, you will ask, were things allowed to go this length? Where were his parents, the nurse and servants meanwhile? The change began gradually, as all such changes do. Mrs. Duerdon, ever engaged in her own trivial pursuits, had no time to notice any defalcations. If she met the boy at luncheon, and for an hour in the drawing-room before dinner, it was all she required. He always managed to appear then tidy and quiet. What to her that he had made a scramble for it at the last minute? He was there, and she had no reason to suspect that he had been anywhere else. Owen's delinquencies began during the period of

Norman's illness; mildly and quietly at first, but still the mischief was begun. Mr. Duerdon's thoughts were fully engrossed. He supposed Owen was going on all right; he had no cause to suppose otherwise. Spence, too, was engaged in nursing the dying boy. It was some time before Mr. Duerdon found out how badly Miss Sharp performed her duties. She was peremptorily discharged, and a Miss Foster engaged. Mrs. Duerdon was ill at the time, and Mr. Duerdon never deeming the mischief committed to have been as great as it was, hid Owen's delinquencies from her, merely assigning some plausible excuse for Miss Sharp's hasty departure.

Mrs. Duerdon was displeased at not being consulted in the matter, but was scarcely well enough to complain much. Miss Foster appeared on the scene, but Owen had gone too long uncorrected. He had tasted liberty, and he did not mean to be broken in. Miss Foster had not the smallest control over the young boy. In despair she appealed to Mr. Duerdon. Like all fathers, Mr. Duerdon was inclined to think Miss Foster was to blame in her management. Owen was too small to be as wayward and obstinate as she described. As to his worse qualities, Mr. Duerdon disbelieved them *in toto;* ignored them altogether. He remembered with sorrow how at one time he had credited Mrs. Duerdon's tales against the Vivians, and determined not so to err again. So Miss Foster was told to be firm and patient, and Owen would come all

right. The consequence was he grew worse and worse. News of his escapades were taken to Mrs. Duerdon from time to time as she lay convalescent. She shrugged her shoulders and said "boys would be boys; you could not put old heads on young shoulders." At another time she would be fretful, and declare it seemed as if she had all the trouble in the world, nothing ever went right. Yet another mood would come over her. "She would not listen to tales against her own son. Every one was leagued against him." But in whatever spirit Mrs. Duerdon was, however strange her mood, one thing she persisted in, Mr. Duerdon was not to be told any tale against the boy. The servant who informed him should leave the house immediately. Miss Foster made no more complaints, she thought it was useless. Mr. Duerdon thus hoped all was right. Owen was on his best behaviour before his father, and thus things went on.

Muriel spent a fortnight at home that Christmas, but did not see anything to arouse her suspicion, and as Owen was really taken up with her, and never cared to be away, she had not the slightest idea of the change, and no one told her. But in the midsummer holidays her eyes were opened, and she was grieved beyond all words. She was at her wits' end what to do, and was determined to try her best. All her time should be devoted to him, and much she wished Norman was there to give aid and counsel. Her great unselfishness shone brightly at that time. Not

one word of her dismay and grief at the sad change in Owen did she communicate to any one, not even to Alan. She would have liked his advice, but she did not care to divulge family affairs, that in one way might not be looked on as her own. But gently, patiently, unweariedly, she talked and reasoned with the naughty boy. She joined in all his games and strove to amuse him, and it was during this period that she managed to overcome better her own desolation and grief than she had done in any previous effort.

Thus is it ever! serve others well and self is forgotten. The unselfish act always brings its own reward. Owen learnt to love Muriel more and more, and to be guided by her wishes. She had all the qualities that his weak, yielding, yet amiable character required, and he began to lean on her judgment in everything. But this was not what she desired; the improvement would be only of short duration if he fell directly she returned to school, so she then spoke openly to Mr. Duerdon on the point—very openly and unreservedly for her. Mr. Duerdon was shocked to find Miss Foster had been right. He blamed himself excessively, and was ready to rush into the other extreme at once. He was all for stern measures. Here again Muriel stepped in. She told him he would only injure the boy permanently, foster his deceit, and check the growth of good. Owen required great gentleness, and she implored Mr. Duerdon to send him away to school, where he

would neither be ruined by neglect, over-indulgence, or strictness; such a home as was Mrs. Clementi Coleman's, could he find such a one for boys. The result was, Owen was despatched to Brighton, not without much lamentation and wailing from Mrs. Duerdon, who declared Owen was right enough if left alone. She had no idea of her son being sent away from home like a mere nobody. Why not have a tutor? Mr. Duerdon promised to try that by-and-bye. They must wait for results meanwhile, and the results were most satisfactory. Owen improved in every way, both mentally and bodily. Even Mrs. Duerdon was fain to own that Muriel's advice had been good.

Once more Millicent's children had helped to repay the Duerdons for their home. Had not Muriel acted as she did, no one could tell what Owen's character unchecked might have become. We need not enter into the "might-have-beens," merely state things as they were. At twelve years of age Owen was an average schoolboy, with neither great abilities nor virtues, but without any deceit or vice in him, and most devotedly attached to Muriel.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Alan Murray's home, Stonecourt, was about eight or nine miles from Astley. It was a grand house, built, as its name signified, in stone. It had two wings added to the original design, a north and a south wing. It was a large mansion, and stood in extensive grounds of its own. There was no actual park, and the entrance was not in the front through the smooth velvet lawns, but at the side through banks of shrubs and flowers. A very wide gravel drive wound round the entire front of the house. The back part of the building was very old, so old that archæologists scarce liked to fix a date, but they all agreed in fixing it before William the Conqueror, the great Normandy king's time. Monks used to inhabit its shelter then, and many a secret passage had led under the kitchen slabs straight through to the church, which was not very far distant. The front of the mansion had been rebuilt by Alan's grandfather about the year 1780, though the wings had been added later on. Beyond the drive stretched acres of mossy green grass as far almost as the eye could reach away and away. Nearer home, and separated from the large lawn by a silver stream that added greatly to the beauty of the spot, was an ornamental flower garden, most tastefully designed and

laid out. It was a lovely place, and one that one's pen lingers in hopeless bewilderment over, at having to describe such a charming home—stops and gives up in despair. Stonecourt had belonged to the Murrays' ancestors for generations. They had built and rebuilt the front part according to their pleasure. The back part, consecrated by the past lives of monks and holy men, they had none of them the temerity to touch. The Murrays were of good birth and wealthy. Alan was sole master. His father had died more than a year before Norman Vivian's death. In one of the morning rooms at Stonecourt, which opened into a pretty conservatory filled with choice flowers, their faint and delicate perfume wafted to her, sat Mrs. Murray. She was tall and stately, with much grace of manner. Young still, that is, not much over forty; well preserved, well dressed, she made a gracious picture. Her rich thick corded black silk fitted her figure, and set it off to perfection. She wore a coiffure of old lace on her head, but she did not require it, her hair was far too abundant to need any adorning. Like Alan's it was of a rich nut brown, soft and wavy. She was reading—perhaps it would be more correct to say she had been reading—for the book lay open on her lap, and her eyes, blue and clear, gazed beyond with an absent look.

"Good-morning, mother mine," said a voice cheerfully from behind. "A silver threepenny for

your thoughts; we will shake hands over the payment. Are you agreeable to the arrangement?"

And Alan stooped down and kissed his mother's forehead.

"Where have you sprung from, Alan?" replied Mrs. Murray quietly, and in no way disconcerted at his sudden appearance. "I never heard the door open."

"Simply, mother, because I never opened it. I walked straight through the conservatory, and made a tremendous clatter and rattle, as I always do, but you did not rouse. You were lost in thoughts. May I give a guess what they were? Will you pay me if I guess correctly?"

"Mercenary youth," smiled Mrs. Murray. "Rather let me ask you a question or two as to your proceedings. Sir Phillip Verdun and his sister have gone on a ramble to sketch some ancient view they have discovered somewhere, and Caroline and Nora have been very disconsolate at your desertion. Now, Alan, where have you been?"

"Scouring the woods, mother mine, in search of violets, and finding none. Fortunately Griffiths procured me some from somewhere. I told him long ago to let me have them all the year round no matter what they cost."

"I should have thought violets were plentiful enough," remarked Mrs. Murray. "Griffiths must have found them in the woods. But Alan,

I scarcely like you leaving our guests so much as you do. Spare a few days to them; it is all I ask."

Alan threw himself in an arm-chair to the threatened destruction of its springs.

"Your will is law," he replied politely. "I will try and be more at home for the next few days, mother; but to-day I must ride over to Astley. I gave my promise to Muriel, and I have the violets to take besides. You have not smelt them; I will fetch them out of the conservatory. There, now, are they not delicious?"

And he pressed them to his mother's nose.

"Sweet beyond compare. Lucky Muriel," smiled Mrs. Murray, rather meaningly. "She little knows the compliment you paid her in hunting the woods through yourself. Why not have sent a couple of men? You would then have stood a better chance of pleasing every one. My son, are you aware of your motive?"

Alan coloured.

"Quite, mother; they are for a friend. It was loving work looking for them."

The door opened, and Caroline Danvers came in. She had grown a lovely girl. Nature had been very liberal to her. Fair, with a splendid complexion that was set off by cheeks of peach bloom. Eyes of deepest grey, large and almond-shaped, were shaded by long lashes which swept her cheeks and added to their lustre. Her nose was small and slightly *retroussé*, but it suited the

style of her face, and to complete the picture her mouth was small.

"Oh, Alan, what sweet violets!" she exclaimed. "Where did you get them? Are they for Nora and me?"

Alan hugged his treasures to him. To no one but Muriel could they be given.

"They are not the kind of flowers for you, Carrie," he replied, "simple little violets! You must have some pretty hothouse plants with plenty of maidenhair fern. They would be better suited to your taste."

Carrie was pleased with this tribute to her charms.

"You can ask Royle to get them, Caroline," observed Mrs. Murray, with a carefully hidden smile.

She was thinking lookers-on saw most of the game.

"I would rather leave the selection to Alan's taste," replied Caroline. "He always presents us with such pretty bouquets."

"Get your hats then," said easy Alan. "Call Nora to join us."

He was dying to be off, but he was one to make the best of circumstances.

"Where is Nora?" asked Mrs. Murray.

"I left her upstairs; she said she would not be a couple of minutes. Oh, Mrs. Murray, I forgot to tell you Sir Phillip Verdun was in the dining-room, and his sister."

"That prevents my joining you then. Au revoir."

This was just what Miss Carrie wanted. She dearly loved a tête-à-tête with Alan, but that young gentleman was equal to the occasion.

"Where is Nora? Where can she be?" asked he, taking out his watch. "I have an appointment at twelve, and shall have to be starting."

"Never mind Nora," was the selfish rejoinder. "She always spends such an unconscionable time over her toilet."

"A lady's privilege, is it not?" demanded Alan, "or rather one of them," he added gallantly. "They are too numerous to allow of enumeration. Can you whistle, Carrie?"

"No; that is not one of my accomplishments."

"I mean through a silver whistle like this," and Alan detached one from his chain. "Excuse me a moment; I will summon Miss Stanhope."

He strode into the hall and blew a whistle loud and shrill, which summoned people from all directions, his mother among the number. She came close to Alan.

"Will you give my love to Muriel," she said in a low tone, "and tell her I shall be pleased if she can join our party here for a week? Mrs. Duerdon can surely let her come."

"Many thanks, mother mine; I will do my best you may be sure. We could have some pleasant times if Muriel was here."

Mrs. Murray looked significantly at her son.

Alan's eyes fell before her, but only for an instant.

"Mother," he whispered, "do me a good turn. Release me from Caroline Danvers' society before many minutes, or I shall make a bolt of it. She fastens herself on to my coat sleeve, and I cannot shake her off."

Mrs. Murray nodded her head slowly.

"I will do as much some time for you, mother," laughed Alan. "I promise to take care that you and Sir Phillip are never disturbed in any of your little chats."

Alan ran off; he did not wait to watch the effect of this speech.

"Incorrigible Alan!" declared Mrs. Murray, looking after her son.

It was nearly luncheon time when Alan arrived at Astley Park gates. There was no time for a little private chat with Muriel then, and after luncheon Mr. Duerdon claimed the young man's attention.

Indolent as Alan had been over his studies, he was untiring and energetic in all that appertained to his estates, and managed his own affairs with justice and judgment. Mr. Duerdon often consulted him. He kept him talking over one thing or another until nearly four o'clock. Alan chafed under the delay; not for this had he got his mother to let him off. The violets, too, he feared would wither. But he need not have feared; they looked very fresh as Muriel took them gingerly out of the little box in which they snugly lay.

"How pretty and how sweet they are!" exclaimed she in delight, as she held them up tenderly.

Alan was gratified.

"If you do not mind I should like to put them on dear Nor's grave; they are so very, very nice."

There was no reply.

"You know, Alan, we always agreed to place the best of everything there," proceeded Muriel.

Her eyes glanced beseechingly at her companion, an earnest light in their depths. She guessed that Alan was not pleased at the proposition.

Alan kicked a stone that lay near his feet, kicked it in savage desperation. Why did she want the best of everything to go there? He had meant those flowers for her and her alone. He wanted to see her wearing them. Surely she could not care for him.

"Muriel, you must keep them; they are specially for you. Norman always used to gather you some because you loved them. Please keep them. Do."

Muriel seemed undecided. She would rather place them on the grave. Yet how could she disregard Alan's wish?

"If Norman were here," continued Alan, seeing his advantage, "he would rather you kept them. Why, Muriel, the sight and fragrance of them combined once saved your reason, if not your life. Come, let me fasten them in your brooch."

Muriel held them out, a smile shining through her tears.

"I cannot imagine what has come to you, Alan," she remarked quaintly. "You used always to wish me to do what I liked best with the flowers you brought. These are so beautifully arranged that I"—

"My mother arranged them," interrupted Alan proudly, "for you too, whilst I took Caroline and Nora to get a bouquet each of hothouse flowers. They will wear one to honour me. Will you do less?"

"I am holding them out; take pity on my arm," smiled Muriel. "Please pin them near my throat like you pinned the last."

Muriel's manner was perfectly unconstrained as she made the request. Alan's, on the contrary, was slightly embarrassed, but he strove hard to hide it. It was most amusing to watch him doing his best to arrange the violets to the best advantage, moving his head from side to side affecting to be looking at them, in reality watching the face that was day by day growing dearer to him. Great was the temptation to take it between his two strong hands and kiss it, it was so close to him, so confidingly, so unsuspiciously close. But he restrained himself. Friend though she called him, she might not regard such an effusion as a friend's privilege. Muriel little guessed the conflict that was waging war within him. Not the slightest idea had she

that he cared for her; not the least thought had she of love at all. She began to think at last that he was a long time in pinning the violets.

"I am afraid I am giving you a great deal of trouble, Alan," she observed unsuspiciously. "Let me run in and get Major to fasten them. It will not take a minute, and she has great taste in flowers."

"They are done now, just finished, and without Major's help," replied Alan, leaving go of them reluctantly. "Oh, by the way, Murie, my mother wants you to come over for a week or so. Do come; it will be so nice."

Muriel's face glowed and brightened. It became really transformed through its sunshine.

"How delightful!" she declared gladly. "I always love to visit Stonecourt. I hope Mrs. Duerdon can spare me."

"Do not ask her, Murie. Judge for yourself."

"She might be lonely without me. Have you mentioned it to her?"

"No; my mother's message was to you, not to Mrs. Duerdon."

"Still, Alan, if she cannot spare me it would be selfish to come. She seems to depend on me for everything. I sometimes wish just for a little bit that she would be as she used to be."

"Aye; it would be better. Has the time come when Mr. Duerdon's goodness is being rewarded even to his wife. She scarcely deserves it, Murie."

"I think you are wrong, Alan," dissented

Muriel. She never listened to a word against Mrs. Duerdon now. "She has improved more than any of us, and deserves rewarding as you call it. Should we go in and see what she says?"

"By all means. I want to take back word to my mother, Murie, and I must be home by seven o'clock dinner. Did you really think I could stay? No such good luck until Caroline and Miss Stanhope leave. So if you want me you must come over and stay at Stonecourt. I shall not be able to leave there for the next few days."

"What is Carrie like? Is she pretty?" inquired Muriel.

"Pretty is no word to explain her looks. She is lovely, Murie, like some of the pictures we sometimes see. Have you not seen her lately?"

"No, not since I first left school. She was growing very nice-looking then, but I always thought her an elegant girl. Had we not better go in and see what Mrs. Duerdon says about my going to Stonecourt?"

They found Mrs. Duerdon lying on the sofa in the drawing-room as usual. There was never much difficulty in finding her. She was doing nothing, not even reading.

"Where have you been, Muriel?" she asked fretfully, as they joined her. "You are very thoughtless about my comfort lately. I wish I had some one else with me. You often forget me, dear."

"Have you wanted anything doing, Aunt Clara?" inquired Muriel, bending over her. "Let

me arrange your cushions a little more comfortably."

Muriel often called Mrs. Duerdon Aunt Clara, but she rarely used the title of Uncle Fred to Mr. Duerdon; it reminded her too vividly of Norman.

"What a thoughtless question to put," pursued Mrs. Duerdon. "You know I must be lonely when left to myself, and who is there to do anything for me if you are away?"

"You must blame me," spoke up Alan. "I am the guilty party, the offending one. I coaxed Muriel off for a little stroll, and it is only at her solicitation we have come back."

Mrs. Duerdon was mollified.

"My mother is coming to call on you some day soon," continued Alan, "but it will not be for a week or so; in the meantime she wants you to spare her Muriel for a little change."

Alan had opened his petition advisedly. He knew Mrs. Duerdon liked to receive a call from Mrs. Murray. It was a well-timed propitiation.

"Muriel can do as she likes," replied Mrs. Duerdon. "She is old enough; she was twenty-one last March."

"It is not a question of what I like," said Muriel, with sparkling eyes. "We all know how fond I am of Stonecourt and its surroundings, and of course I am well aware that I can do as I like in one sense; but I wish to consult your feelings, Aunt Clara. You have not been at all well lately. Can you manage to do without me?"

"How ridiculous you are, Muriel; do without you, of course I can. As of old you think yourself of vast importance. True, I have got to care for you, being with me. I like to see you moving about in your quiet way. I like to hear your voice, to feel you near. But as usual when I get fond of anything, it turns round and leaves me."

"Another unfortunate tribute to the truth of Lallah Rooke's words," interposed Alan, lightly.

"Oh, ever thus since childhood's hours,
I've seen my fondest hopes decay,
I never loved a tree nor flower,
But it was first to fade away,
I never nursed a dear gazelle,
To cheer me with its clear black eye,
But when it came to know me well,
And love me—it was sure to die."

"I cannot think why you want to go away," continued Mrs. Duerdon, querulously, unheeding the interruption. "You have everything you want here. Our house is as nice as Stonecourt. Surely your uncle and I are as kind as any one else can be to you."

Muriel could have said how different was life spent with Mrs. Murray to life spent with Mrs. Duerdon. How in one place the sun seemed always to shine, how all was bright with cheerfulness and content, whilst in the other there was ever a straining after happiness—a search after pleasure, which never brought peace, but she only replied with constraint in her manner, a constraint which she could not have repressed howsoever much she wished.

"Oh, yes, I have everything that money can buy. I fancied I should like the change, but I must take another opportunity. Alan, thank your mother, please, and say Mrs. Duerdon is not well enough to be left."

Alan's face fell.

"I decline to take such a message," he said. "I could not be the bearer of a refusal to my mother. She would be too disappointed. Imagine how she would condemn my negotiations and send another ambassador. I should be deposed from my post in deep disgrace. Mrs. Duerdon you can spare Muriel. You will spare her, say so. Use your persuasions and induce her to come."

Mrs. Duerdon smiled languidly.

"You had better go, Muriel, or I shall have no peace, I told you before to study your inclinations. I shall survive your loss, I daresay, it will not be quite irreparable. But my dear, your selfishness is not yet eradicated, you make poor returns to me for all past kindnesses."

The muscles of Muriel's face worked, conflicting emotions stirred her. Alan spoke.

"Well, Mrs. Duerdon," he said, annoyed greatly yet trying to carry off his annoyance in a laugh, "you use your inducements in a strange manner. It is as if you said go, yet better stay, in the same breath. Your mode of treating the case reminds me of—of—a cat toying with a mouse. The cat always as you know allows the mouse a pretended escape, suffers the poor little creature to be re-

leased from its claws—but—only for a while, only to capture it in sterner captivity. This seems to me something like your permission to Muriel."

"I fail to detect the similarity. I may be blind but I cannot see that the cases are analogous," returned Mrs. Duerdon, coldly. "Muriel is her own mistress, she can do as she likes. Of this she is well aware. Asking for my consent is but paying a poor and palpable compliment. I know well enough which ending the whole affair will take. Muriel will go, my wishes will be disregarded. I shall be left to my own poor devices as usual, the victim ever. It is a lucky thing I am able to amuse myself."

Alan turned away, irritated, disgusted. There was silence. Muriel was too hurt to speak.

"I wonder where Mr. Duerdon is?" queried Mrs. Duerdon, fretfully.

"I think he has gone down to the farm," replied Muriel, in a low tone. "We saw him in the distance. At least you thought he was going in that direction, Alan."

"I wish he would come in," added Mrs. Duerdon. "He promised to read to me."

"Shall I read?" asked Muriel, quickly. "I thought you said you were tired of listening, or I would have suggested it sooner."

"That was ever so many hours ago. How long the days are to be sure. Yes, you may read if you like."

Muriel glanced uneasily at Alan, she wondered

what he would do whilst she was reading. He was angry already, she did not care to make him more so. Without more ado she walked up to him, he was standing near the window.

"Alan," she said, gently, "I am very sorry—sorry for you, grieved for myself, but it is perhaps best so. I should have loved to have visited you all at sunny Stonecourt, it would have been enjoyment beyond words—happiness—bliss."

Alan looked at her eagerly.

"Come then," he said, "if you really mean what you say, you will come. Even Mrs. Duerdon says you may do as you like."

"I cannot, Alan; before pleasure is duty. My duty to Mrs. Duerdon is to respect her feelings."

"Feelings! Bosh! she has none. She is the very incarnation of selfishness. She is always thinking of herself."

They were both speaking in low tones.

"Are you coming, Muriel?" inquired Mrs. Duerdon. "If you are looking for my book it is here on the sofa. Whilst you were all away on your own pleasure I had to contrive to while away the time."

"I will come presently," replied Muriel, pleasantly. "Alan will be leaving, I have a few words to say to him ere he goes."

"How patient you are, Muriel," said Alan, wonderingly, "how marvellously you bear with Mrs. Duerdon."

"And you must be patient too, Alan," returned

Muriel, quietly. "We cannot get our own way in this world. You must strive to think well of her, and it will make your task easier."

She laid her hand gently on Alan's arm as she spoke. He seized it and pressed it eagerly in one of his strong hands.

"If you care for—for my mother," he pleaded, "change your mind and come. We will do all we can to render your visit happy. Oh Murie, do not be hard, come."

His handsome face looked down on her, his blue eyes gleamed into hers imploringly.

"I may not, Alan, there is no question of it now. I have put the temptation away."

There was a calm look of resolve on her face that became her well just then, and if she could not boast of any actual beauty, there was an expression there that many a more perfect-featured face lacked. If not a pretty face, Muriel Vivian's was a sweet one.

"You do not care for us then," retorted Alan, crossly. "It is just probable, within the range you know, that you might find that you owe a duty to some one else besides Mrs. Duerdon."

Muriel's face became perplexed.

"She is not doing *her* duty at all," persisted Alan. "She promised Norman she would be kind to you."

"So she is kind."

"She makes you a slave, who has to consult her every whim and caprice, and Norman never asked you to deny everything for her."

"No, Alan, he knew such a promise was needless. At least he knew well that I should always strive to do what was right with every one. As to self-denial, I practise but little of that I fear. Mrs. Duerdon will be getting impatient, I must keep her no longer. Are you leaving?"

There was no answer. Muriel waited but still it did not come.

"I will say good-bye later on then," she said, and moved away.

Alan strode after her. She took the nicely bound novel off the sofa and sat down. Alan took it out of her hand.

"Allow me," he said. "Mrs. Duerdon let me read, it is one of my few accomplishments, and one that as you know I owe to my mother, and am therefore proud of. Where did you leave off?"

With some difficulty Mrs. Duerdon found the place. In a rich clear voice he read for some time. It was a pleasure to listen to him, a pleasure that Muriel always enjoyed.

"Well, Alan, you certainly excel in reading aloud," owned Mrs. Duerdon. "I wish I could hear Muriel as well, her voice is not loud."

"Muriel beats me into fits," declared Alan, staunchly. "My mother always says Muriel's intonation and style are perfection. Mrs. Duerdon, I have a favour to ask, will you grant it?"

"What is it?" she asked, expectantly.

"Send Muriel to Stonecourt now, do," he

begged, coaxingly, "and I will come and read to you every day after her return."

Mrs. Duerdon fidgeted.

"I thought that affair was quite settled," she answered, in a tone of disappointment. "I expected you were going to demand a fresh favour."

"It is not settled as my mother would have it," said Alan.

"Say rather it is not settled as you would like it to be," replied Mrs. Duerdon, with unusual penetration. "For some hidden reason, Alan, you seem strangely persistent. Muriel, you will have to go. I cannot endure this continued importunity."

Muriel did not speak, but she went and shook Mrs. Duerdon's cushion pillow, and placed it more comfortably under her head.

"Yes, you had better go," pursued Mrs. Duerdon. "Did I not tell you how it would be. I am the victim once more."

"If by being the victim you mean to infer that you are going to get rid of me, you are mistaken, Aunt Clara," decided Muriel, in a firm tone. "I have declined to accept Mrs. Murray's kind invitation. Please say no more about it."

Alan bounced up, no other word would give any idea of the suddenness and abruptness of his movements.

"Good-day, Mrs. Duerdon," he said, shaking hands, "I will go—good-bye, Muriel."

Muriel glanced wistfully after him as he strode away, her heart in her eyes. He had never left her thus before.

"Follow him, Muriel," commanded Mrs. Duerdon, fretfully. "He is offended now. I never saw such a world as it is, one never can please people try as they will. Hasten, or you will not catch him, and I do not want to displease young Murray, he is such an agreeable young fellow."

Muriel needed no second bidding, and it was not until she had caught Alan that the foolishness of her proceedings struck her.

"Is anything the matter?" demanded Alan, stiffly, "have I forgotten some parcel, or does some one want me?"

Muriel was panting with her exertions, for Alan was walking at the rate of ten miles an hour. Panting and breathless she scarce knew what to say. How strange it seemed to be running after Alan like that.

"I—I"— she began.

"Murie," he said, in a kinder tone, "you should not hurry. The day is too warm. Have you some errand for me to execute? Or"—and here his eyes kindled, "have you determined to change your mind."

She shook her head.

"Take my arm then, Murie, and I will open my large umbrella and you will be sheltered under its shade."

She took his proffered escort.

"I will go as far as the lodge," she said, "and then I must turn. It reminds me of a day years ago, when I ran after dear Norman."

"What reminds you?"

"This hurried run, and the coming without my hat. Dear, dear Norman, how he limped that day. How ill he was then, poor boy."

"Do not dwell on any sad part of his life," remarked Alan, kindly. "Remember how much better he is off now."

"I will remember," replied Muriel, with large tears in her eyes. "And Alan, I am so sorry you are angry with me for not going to Stonecourt."

"Not angry Murie, only grieved, only sad."

"But you should not be grieved, or sorry at all, when you know how things are. You see how Mrs. Duerdon requires my care, you must not mind my absence. Your mother will not care so very much, will she?"

Alan could not meet Muriel's eye at that question. He knew that it was not on his mother's account that he grieved.

"We are going to meet some one," he exclaimed, hastily, "a man—a gentleman, who is it, Murie?"

"A stranger whoever he may be," answered Muriel, scanning some figure quickly advancing towards them. "I should not say he was a gentleman," added she, deliberating, "he scarcely looks one."

"Why, how can you tell," questioned Alan. "He is dressed like one, and so far you have not heard him talk."

"I judge by his gait and walk. Perhaps he will speak when we meet."

Muriel was not mistaken in her surmise. The stranger took off his hat.

"Am I in the presence of Miss Duerdon?" he asked, politely.

"No, there is no Miss Duerdon—I am Miss Vivian."

"I fear I have come wrong, then. The people at the gates assured me that if I walked straight on I should come to Mr. Duerdon's."

"So you will, a little farther on and you will reach your destination. Good-afternoon."

"Does Miss Andrews live there?" pursued the stranger.

"Miss Andrews," echoed Muriel, in surprise.

"There is no Miss Andrews at Astley Park," interrupted Alan, haughtily. "Muriel, come on."

"That is strange," replied the strange man. "She did live here not long since. Major Andrews, I mean."

"Oh!" exclaimed Muriel quickly, "I see our mistake. Yes, you will find her there. We always call her Major; I fancied that was her surname."

"Thank you, Miss Vivian. I am glad I have found her. Good afternoon."

"What a presumptuous piece of humanity," declared Alan warmly. "You were quick in your

instinct as to doubting his right of being called gentleman. How the fellow stared at you to be sure."

"He was very interested in hearing whether he was on the road to Major," returned Muriel, "and that naturally accounted for his looking so earnestly at me. He had a nice face, Alan, and a tremendous beard."

"No gentleman nevertheless," repeated Alan, stoutly.

"Yet he spoke fairly well," retorted Muriel, mischievously. "He had no Yorkshire twang, or whatever else we may term it. No provincialisms, or left-out *h*'s."

"How could we guess that by the few words he said?" asked Alan, laughing. "Come, Muriel, confess you know something about him."

"I have my suspicions," agreed Muriel, "suspicions, nothing more. Major had a lover in Australia, this must be he."

"Phew!" whistled Alan.

"Alan, are you going to walk home?" asked Muriel, presently.

Alan stopped abruptly and drew himself up. "Well, I have been foolish," he exclaimed, instantly. "I scarcely knew what I was doing when I left you so unceremoniously; my horse is in your stable. Never mind, I shall be able to walk back with you."

Muriel laughed heartily.

"You may laugh," grumbled Alan, ruefully,

"but I found it no laughing matter, I assure you. Muriel, it was no small grief to find you could so easily put Mrs. Duerdon's wishes to consideration, and so lightly throw my mother's and mine aside."

"I did not do it easily," said Muriel, in a low tone. "I found it very hard to give way, but I thought it was right and that helped me."

"Muriel, you do not guess how we care for you," remarked Alan, with subdued passion. "You are so quiet, so unemotional, I often wonder whether you feel at all."

Muriel was sorry to renew the discussion, but she did not betray it.

"Oh, yes, Alan, I do guess," she replied earnestly, raising her large truthful eyes to his. "Your mother and you are my best friends. I do not know what I should do without you. Did I not show it pretty plainly in rushing after you in the mad way I did just now?"

"Ah, yes, true," assented Alan, a glad light suffusing his face. "You did not like separating in an unfriendly spirit."

"Certainly not."

"Was it your own idea overtaking me?"

Muriel deliberated.

"No, not exactly. I wanted to come, but I scarcely think I should have done so had not Mrs. Duerdon wished it."

"And you forgive me?" asked Alan. "I will never leave you in that cool fashion again." The

glad light had all faded, he looked distressed—serious.

"You never must," replied Muriel. "We must ever remain friends whoever else chooses to disagree."

"I will keep my part of the compact. One thing *you* must try and remember, that is not to judge me too severely. I am so accustomed to having my own way that the least contradiction vexes me. You must try and take me at the best."

"That will be easy," responded Muriel, with one of her rare smiles. "You will always be high in my estimation."

"Good-bye, Murie,"

"Good-bye, Alan. Love to your mater."

She turned to go in.

"Stay, Muriel," said Alan, "we need not part yet."

Muriel looked surprised, as well she might, considering he had taken the initiative.

"I think, Alan," she said, gently, "that it was your proposition that we should part."

"So I did," frankly avowed Master Alan, "but there is no immediate hurry."

Muriel thought of Mrs. Duerdon and the reading, but she did not care to distress Alan again so long as it could be avoided, so she said nothing. But he read her face.

"Ah, I forgot Mrs. Duerdon," he said. "Bother her; oh, do not look at me so reproachfully Muriel.

I am not myself to-day. Give me your hand once more."

Muriel gave it. He snatched and raised it to his lips and showered kisses on it.

"There, now," he exclaimed hotly, "I have vexed you more than ever. Offended beyond all forgiveness. I will run off and flirt with Carrie. She is an adept in the art. She at any rate will appreciate me."

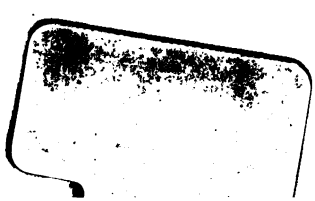
"Give her my love too," said Muriel, walking away. "It is very nice for her staying at Stonecourt."

Muriel's face was covered with blushes, a most uncommon circumstance with her. She had only taken a few steps when Alan overtook her.

"Muriel, I have not vexed you—you are not angry?"

"No, Alan, I am never angry with you—never vexed. You must not think such things. I like you too well, my friend."

They had reached the hall door. He raised his hat and she left him.

END OF VOL. II.

Printed by REMINGTON & Co., 134, New Bond Street, W.